

The Kid by lollercakes

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Summary:

It all started with a storm. An emergency call that took Chief Jim Hopper to the edge of town where he discovered more than just a broken down home with ratty carpet. The white haired man. A girl. Both disappeared into the forest without warning. He couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right.

1. Chapter 1

“Open up, Chief of Police!” Jim Hopper shouts as he bangs on the door. The place was run down, cars on cinder blocks filled the yard and the paint was peeling on the old clapboard that warped along the side of the house. Around them trees rustled in the wind, the incoming storm rattling the sky and reminding them that they were running short on time.

It was his first call to the south side of town, the area typically uninhabited but for a few junkyards and an old sawmill factory. As he'd driven up the driveway to meet his deputy, he'd leaned over the wheel and frowned as the details started clicking into place. A domestic dispute? Here? What kind of monster would keep a family in this place? He tried not to judge a book by its cover but this was beyond reasonable standards, even for this town.

“Chief, the radio's saying there's a tornado in the region, we should take cover,” Phil Callahan shouts from his perch near his cruiser.

“Come on buddy, don't make me break down the door,” Hopper grumbles and bangs his fist heavily on the door once more. Beyond the thin wood he hears a shriek and the slamming of something heavy, the first sign of life within the house since their arrival. “We've got movement Callahan.”

His deputy is by his side in a flash, gun drawn and eyes wide as Hopper motions towards the handle. Counting down with his fingers, he pauses at one and leans back, kicking the door with all his might and cracking it loose from its frame until it's twisting and falling to the ground inside the house.

“Hawkins Police, we’re entering the home. Come out with your hands above your head so we can work this out,” Hopper calls and tries not to let his voice waver as the storm picks up outside and the lights flicker overhead.

“You have no right - “ A man with shock white hair scolds from the hallway to their left. “- To enter my home - “

“I heard a call for help and we’ve received a complaint. We’re here to assist,” Hopper’s words are barely audible over a clap of thunder, the sound echoing around them and making Callahan at his side lower his gun.

“We’re - everything is fine, Officer.” The man with the white hair replies, stepping towards them slowly.

“Where’s the girl? My dispatcher says it was a female voice on the line, I need to see her to ensure that she’s - “

“I can assure you there’s no girl on this property - I don’t know where that call came from but it wasn’t here. I don’t even have a phone, see?” He motioned towards the wall where the wood marks showed the history of a phone that was no longer there.

The hair on the back of Hopper’s neck stood on end, his eyes squinting as the man came too close for comfort. Beyond the roof of the shanty home, lightning struck and a crack rattled through the air, a tree somewhere falling with a thump that shook the walls.

“Chief,” Callahan exclaimed lowly, looking towards the white haired man and then back to his boss.

“Cuff him. Something isn’t sitting right,” he muttered, watching as Callahan pulled the man’s wrists from the air and secured them in his cuffs.

“You’ll live to regret this, *Chief* .” The man scolded before jerking his hands in the metal until he yelped and stopped resisting.

“I’m going to check the rooms. Take him to the cruiser,” Hopper instructed and didn’t wait for his deputy to respond before heading off down the hallway.

Outside the wind was picking up, an angry howl rolling around the edges of the house and causing the insulation to flutter in the drafts of the cracking drywall. He knew he was short on time as he moved down the hallway - if it really was a tornado they needed to get somewhere safer fast - but he refused to ignore the shriek he’d heard earlier and Flo’s certainty that it had been a girl who called... Or had she radioed? He couldn’t remember.

The first door he kicked in was a bedroom that held only a hospital bed with slim furnishings, a bedside table and a dilapidated dresser. Determining quickly that no one was in the room he moved on to the bathroom and pulled so hard at the shower curtain that the whole bar fell from its place.

“Goddamnit - Is there anyone else here?” He called out as the last two doors vibrated with the shock of thunder overhead. The dim lighting was playing games with his mind as the shadows flew across the walls and the sweat curled around his collar. He was halfway through the next room when he heard it, a small whimper as a hiss of lightning lit up the house. “Who’s there?”

His hand jerked at the final door, convinced that he would catch whoever was still hiding but coming up short as he looked in at a linen closet, barren except for a blanket stuffed onto the bottom shelf.

A blanket that was moving.

“Hey,” Hopper grunted before tapping his toe against the wool. It shook and jolted, terrified eyes peeking out from below the lowest shelf. “Oh, christ,” he stuttered and lept back in surprise. The eyes blinked as the child poked it’s shaved head out from the closet.

“Police?” She whispered, tentative as she stared at him.

“Yeah kid - are you okay?” He holstered his gun and crouched down to her level, careful to keep his distance so not to scare her away. When she didn’t respond he held out his hand, concern blooming through him when she melted back into the closet defensively. “Look, I’m not going to hurt you, but there’s a storm and we need to get somewhere safe. If you come with me I promise everything will be okay.”

She watches him for a moment longer, the air crackling around them again and signalling that another strike of lightning was about to let

loose, a bit too close for comfort. He was near ready to drag her from the small space when Callahan burst through the front door, breathless. "He took off into the trees! Chief - the clouds are starting to spin, we need to - "

"Callahan!" Hopper shouted and held up his hand, anxiousness coursing through him.

"We gotta go Chief," he squeaked and looked back out the door with a desperation that Hopper felt in his bones.

Turning back to face her, Hopper offered his hand once more and waited until the girl reached out her palm to him. Pulling her free of the space he had to bite his tongue as he took in her hospital gown and the bruises along her boney knees. She kept her eyes down as they made their way to the door, her small frame overwhelmed by the blanket she'd wrapped protectively around her shoulders.

The weather had worsened significantly in the last few minutes - the rain fell in sheets with black and green clouds swirling overhead. Hopper couldn't deny that Callahan had been right to warn them, he didn't think it was safe to go anywhere in this, even in his truck. The best plan was to bunker down and hope the storm passed by them.

"New idea - let's secure what we can here and sit tight. I don't like the look of that sky," Hopper suggested and Callahan groaned.

"Told you," he mumbled before starting to scan the place for a safe area to shelter in.

“Yeah, yeah. Come on kid, we’re gonna put you in the tub while knucklehead over here - “

“Knuckle... head?” The girl questioned, eyes wide as Callahan stepped around her and flew down the hallway to drag the mattress against the wall. Hopper paused at her words, her tentativeness apparent as he stared down at her. Something wasn’t right here but he didn’t have time to deal with it right now.

“Yeah - okay. I’ll explain later,” he said above the roar of the wind, guiding her into the tub and sitting down with his back against the vanity. His eyes never strayed from her, even as the roof shook and she curled further into her knees. “Cover your head. I think - “ He didn’t have time to finish his sentence before he had to lurch forward to cover the girl with his body, the shattering glass from the window overhead raining down on them.

“You okay Chief?” Callahan shouted from his cover in the hallway, glancing around the doorway.

“Peachy. You good?” Hopper returned as he brushed the glass from the girl’s shoulders and looked around them. He couldn’t help but notice that she cringed at his touch, her small body recoiling as his heavy hands grazed her arms. “I’m not going to hurt you,” he added lowly before leaning himself back into his spot, never letting his eyes stray from the crown of her head.

“I think it’s slowing down out there.” His deputy called as the building stopped vibrating.

They waited another twenty minutes before venturing out the front door and into the fray, stepping over fallen trees and towards the vehicles hastily. Hopper was nearly at his truck when he noticed the girl was nowhere to be seen, somehow having disappeared in the minute it took to walk from the building to his truck.

“Where’d she go?” He spun on his heel before heading back into the house and doing a quick sweep. “She’s not here!”

“Probably took off into the forest after her crazy dad,” Callahan replied as he shrugged his shoulders.

“We can’t just leave without them. She’s just a kid.” His mind twisted with the possibilities, visions of the kid shivering in the forest alone all night haunting him as his deputy argued to forget them. “You can head back to the station. I’m going to take a look around - “

“Chief, we can’t do that. Flo’s on the radio saying there’s a emergency we gotta get to in town.”

Swearing under his breath, Hopper stomped to his truck and tossed his emergency kit on the ground. “Kid, if you’re out there, you’ll need this to get through the night!” Climbing into the driver’s seat he followed behind Callahan’s cruiser at a snail’s pace, eyes scanning the trees until he reached the highway and was forced to leave the kid behind.

2. Chapter 2

Hopper had only been back in Hawkins for a couple years, having fled Chicago after a shit run of luck in the place that stole everything from him. He'd come back to lick his wounds, file his divorce papers, and get lost in Tunial, dive bars, and any woman who fancied a night with the Chief between their legs. It wasn't honorable but it worked to keep his mind off the life he'd built in the city and the ruins that it had become.

At least until now.

It'd been two days since the storm hit. Two days since the kid had fled into the treeline and disappeared without a trace. No one in Hawkins had seen her, or heard of her for that matter, and the question of where the two strangers on the edge of town had come from had followed him through sleepless nights and the endless clean-up after all the downed trees and power lines.

"Earth to Hopper," Flo called through the radio, the line crackling as he twisted through the window of the truck to grab the handpiece.

"What's up Flo?" He grumbled into the line, eyes searching the edge of the forest distractedly. He'd snuck off to walk the old hunting paths this morning, determined to start tracking the girl in the hopes that he could find her and get her somewhere safe. It hadn't worked - he'd been gone for hours, hiking most of the morning and only returning to the truck when the drugs started to fade from his system. Now he was irritated and sweaty, his clothes covered in grime from where he'd had to climb over fallen trees in pursuit of what may or may not have been a kid's footprints.

“Joyce Byers is here, says she needs to talk to you,” Flo states evenly. Hopper can already picture his old friend hovering over the desk, her tiny frame wrapped up in itself as she chews absently on her nails.

“Can Powell take the report? I’m a little tied up - “

“No Hop. She says it’s gotta be you. Been here for almost an hour already,” she says with a heavy sigh that signals her exasperation with the woman.

“Fine - okay. I’m coming back in.”

He moves slowly as he climbs back into the truck, his hand absently reaching for the pills he keeps tucked in the back of the glove box. Hopper knocks back two before gulping down the rest of the water, starting the engine and throwing his hat on the bench beside him.

Glancing one last time at the forest, he leaves the empty spot where he’d dumped his emergency bag two days before and heads back to the station. The look he receives when he steps through the door speaks volumes, the older woman rolling her eyes before cocking her head to the side.

“I put her in your office - “

“Flo, we talked about this,” he groans before reaching for his pack of smokes.

“Hey, you weren’t here and I couldn’t stand her staring at me any longer. Get in there and see what she wants and leave me in peace.” The older woman scolds him before turning back to the papers on her desk. It’s his turn to roll his eyes as he walks away, hands busily trying to light his cigarette as he heads to his office.

Inside he finds Joyce standing before his desk, hands tucked in the pockets of her Melvald’s work vest.

“I’ve been waiting here almost the whole morning,” she snips angrily, a frown pulling at her brow as he slides into his desk chair.

“It was a busy morning,” he replies before tossing the pack of cigarettes towards her. She takes the carton quickly and sits with a huff into one of the chairs, leaning in as he offers her a light. “What’s going on that’s got you this wound up?”

Glaring at him, she takes a drag and surprises herself with a coughing fit that nearly knocks her from her seat. “Dammit, Hop,” she croaks and rests her hand against her chest. “How do you even smoke these?”

“Not a relevant question. You’re stalling. Try again,” he offers between tapping the ash and letting his chair squeak as he leans back.

“You’re going to think I’m crazy,” Joyce starts tentatively, eyes focused on the ground as her free hand is pinned between her knees. “I think someone is stealing from the house when the kids are at school. I don’t always have time in the morning to tidy up after breakfast before I have to push the boys out the door but when I came home yesterday half of the mess was already cleaned.”

“And you couldn’t talk to Deputy Powell about this because... ?” His voice remains calm but his body tenses at what she’s saying, the possibility that maybe the girl was the one breaking in being too lucky for even him.

“Cause he’d think I was crazy. Look, I know it’s been a long time since high school and you don’t owe me any favours, but I can’t have this getting out and getting back to my boys. I just can’t. If Lonnie gets word of it - “

“Lonnie’s back in town?” He interjects and sits up sharply at that, mind instantly recalling one of his first calls when he’d come back.

It’d been a miserable night, snow falling heavily and making the roads a mess. His deputies had been tied up for hours helping people dig out of ditches and report minor crashes so he’d responded to the local domestic call without much thought. He hadn’t realized who the call was for until he pulled into the driveway, surprised to see Joyce on the lawn in her pajamas, her two boys wrapped in blankets at her side.

“Lonnie kicked us out,” she said as her teeth chattered, the skin around her eye darkening as he stepped closer. “He said the house was in his name and he didn’t want us there anymore. I’m sorry you had to - “

"Don't worry about it - go get in the truck. The heat's on. Lock the doors until I come back out, okay?" He ordered and waited until they were securely in the vehicle before trudging to the front steps. Anger coursed through him as he banged on the front door, all the power of the police department's fury riling at the back of him.

"She ain't coming back in this house!" Lonnie shouted through the mailslot. "Her name ain't on the lease. This is my house now."

The words made his blood boil and he forced his way in, knocking the man to the floor with ease and wrapping his cuffs around his wrists. It was over in a second - all the frustration he'd been feeling since being back in Hawkins had come roaring out of him as he kneeled on the man's back.

"I'm taking you to the drunk tank overnight. Maybe even charge you with assault," Hopper grunted as he pulled Lonnie to his feet. He practically dragged him to the truck, barefeet tripping through the snow as he motioned for Joyce and the kids to get out. "Go inside. I'll be in in a minute," he instructed brusquely before shoving Lonnie through the door. They didn't wait before heading back to the house, Joyce pulling the kids forward as they tried to look back at the truck.

"Fucking Jim Hopper - I knew your sorry ass would come back," Lonnie crowed as the light from the cab illuminated his face.

"Yeah and I knew you'd still be the same asshole no matter how long it'd been," Hopper returned as he locked the man's cuffs to the seat. Once Lonnie was secured, Hopper pulled the keys from the ignition and rolled down the window before looking back at the house. "Try

to stay warm for a bit. I won't rush."

Heading back towards the house he shook the snow out of his collar before stepping over the threshold and into the tiny living room. Joyce was buzzing about the space, running between the kitchen and returning with mugs of steaming water and packets of hot chocolate. The boys were surrounded by blankets and a heating pad, their small bodies nearly hidden on the couch.

"Joyce," Hopper called, following her into the kitchen and watching as she moved about the space. When she didn't look at him, didn't stop or turn around, he sighed and pulled out a chair. "Come on, sit down," he insisted and reached his hand to her shoulder. She jolted from his touch, startled as she twisted away from him.

"It's fine - you can leave now," she whispered above the sound of the water spraying into the sink.

"I can't just yet - let's take a seat, talk this through for my report." His voice was steady despite the way his chest hurt at the realization that she'd fallen so deeply into the rabbit hole of abuse. Joyce had always been a spitfire growing up - quick witted and strong - but now she cowered like an animal cornered by a wolf.

"I'm not pressing charges. This doesn't happen often," she tries to lie though the crack in her words gives her away.

"Not saying it does. But I gotta get a statement." That seems to drag her away from staring at the sink long enough for him to notice the fading mark on her collar, the brightening stain across her

cheekbone. "Jesus, Joyce," he murmurs as he takes it in, stomach rolling at the sight before him.

"I told him about the divorce tonight. That's why it's worse than usual," she stutters and wraps her arms around her chest protectively. He wants to offer her something - comfort, safety, anything - but he knows he can't make any promises.

"Let me charge him with something. It'll keep him tied up until he can cool down," he pleads as he leans heavily against the counter. Her small hand comes to rest over his, squeezing tightly.

"It'll just make him madder. I'm okay Jim. Really. You've got enough to worry about." Her words have the opposite effect of calming him, the despair of his loss creeping back up his spine and into his head without warning.

Swallowing thickly, he pushes away from the counter and paces across the small kitchen to look into the living room at her kids. She was trying to protect them, just like he tried to do with Sara.

"It's getting late and I know the weather isn't getting any better. If he's locked up for the night we'll be fine here. I'll see if my mom can take us in until we can get this sorted. Does that make it better?" She offers from behind him, her small voice closer than he'd expected and catching him off guard.

"Nothing makes this better, Joyce," he mumbles and steps through to the living room. Saying a quick goodbye, he headed back into the fray.

The memory moves through him like a heavy tar, churning his gut and reminding him of a time he wished he'd forget. There'd been three more calls before the divorce was finalized and Lonnie left town. Three more times that he'd had to see his friend fighting for everything she held dear. Though since coming back to Hawkins they hadn't been close, little Joyce Horowitz still managed to get under his skin and stir up his insides with a mess of feelings he couldn't quite name.

"Yeah - Karen Wheeler mentioned she saw him downtown last time she was dropping off Mike," Joyce replies steadily.

"You think he's the one breaking in?" Hopper questions, bringing up the obvious answer even though a part of his mind keeps rounding back to the girl.

"No - I mean, I doubt it. Why would he steal leftovers? He'd take Jonathan's tip jar before he took cold Eggos off the counter." The small detail makes the hair on Hopper's neck stand on end, the possibility that the mystery kid was hiding out near Joyce's place too coincidental to pass up.

"Alright. I'll go out this afternoon and take a look around," he concedes and watches as she gets up slowly from her seat.

"I'll be at work if you find anything. The kids should be home by 3:30, so if you could - "

“Yeah, I’ll be done by then. I’ll stop by the store later and let you know what I find.” Nodding at that, she gathers up her things and disappears through the door to leave him with his thoughts.

3. Chapter 3

Hopper shuts off the engine and squeezes the steering wheel as he looks out at the Byers' residence. While the place was run down, it still had a feel about it that was purely Joyce's influence - a windchime over the porch, a light left on behind the windows and an old walkway of reclaimed stone that she'd laid herself two summers ago when the store had been closed for renovations. She'd been damn proud of that walkway, or so he'd heard. He'd been too lost in his own misery to notice.

Stepping through the front door he looked around at the space and noted the tidiness and warmth of a well lived-in room. It looked nothing like his trailer and he was glad for that - no one should live the way he lives, not even him.

The first room he heads to is the kitchen, the spot where Joyce noted the most disturbances in the house. Nothing looks out of place from what he can see - not the dishes in the sink or the boxes of cereal on the counter - but still it feels off, as though he's not alone in the house.

Turning a full 360, he makes a mental note and heads down the hallway to check the other rooms, just to be on the safe side. The first door off the hallway is Joyce's bedroom - a cozy space with a half-made bed that tells of the single occupant that sleeps in it every night. He closes the door with a snap, determined to preserve as much of her privacy as he can while he moves through her house. Next is the empty bathroom, then on to Will's room where drawings line the walls like haphazard wallpaper.

Finding nothing he kicks himself mentally as he closes each door.

There was nothing here - no Lonnie and no girl sneaking through the place and stealing things. It was just an -

“Shit - dammit, sorry!” Hopper swore and stumbled to close the door to the last room, tripping and hitting the wall as he tried to unsee what he’d just walked in on. Jonathan and the Wheeler’s oldest, Nancy he thinks, making the best use of final period.

“What are you even doing here, Chief?” Jonathan yelled from behind the closed door, a flurry of movement audible as the teens scurried about.

“Your mom - she asked me to look in on - “

“You can’t tell her I skipped!” Jonathan shouts as he swings open the door, finger pointed at the man’s chest. Hopper tries not to laugh at the way the boy’s hair is askew or the fact that his shirt is inside out, all of which burns away the embarrassment and has him chuckling at the force with which the boy speaks.

“Don’t worry kid, that’s not what this was about. Sorry I even interrupted,” he adds before heading back down the hallway and into the kitchen. He’s so distracted by the hilarity of it all that he almost misses the way the back door slaps closed on its hinges, the person escaping out through the backyard in a moment of flight.

Taking off through the door after them, Hopper crashes onto the porch and catches sight of the hospital gown disappearing into the trees, the girl barefoot as she bolts into the greenery. He follows after her at a quick pace, tracking her through the forest and trying not to

trip over the loose roots and thick bushes that line the underbrush.

“I ain’t gonna hurt you kid,” he calls out when he loses the tracks, huffing in breath with his hands on his hips. “I’ve got a warm bed and all the food you can eat if you just come out of here with me.”

He tries to convince her for what seems like an hour, talking to himself as the sun lowers in the sky. When he eventually gives up he beelines back to his truck to sit and wait a bit longer, determined to catch sight of her but coming up empty once more.

The first place he stops when he gets back into town is at Melvald’s, debating the whole drive as to whether to tell Joyce he knows who the culprit is or not. It’s only when he’s at her till, a line up behind him, that he chickens out and slaps down a bill for a pack of gum.

“When’s your break?” He questions evenly, careful not to let the prying ears of the towns gossip mill catch wind. All he needed was a rumour about him and Joyce being together to get around town and give her a harder time than she already had going for her. She didn’t need him to be another burden she had to carry with two boy’s to raise on her own.

“In about twenty minutes. Meet at the back door,” she whispered and then promptly turned to the next customer in line. Dismissed, he headed back out to his truck and drove around the block before parking across the street from the rear entrance.

He watched absently as she stepped out into the back lot, her arms stretching overhead as she looked around for him. His thoughts were

so occupied with the girl that he barely noticed that Joyce had crossed the road to his truck, arms crossed over the window ledge.

“What did you find Hop?” She asks with a steadiness that barely covers the tension in her voice.

“Nothing really, just your kid home from school early,” he replies and tries to avoid her eyes.

“Jonathan? But he doesn’t have any gap periods this semester - Oh,” she pauses, swallowing thickly and stepping back from the truck. “Oh, okay.”

“Yeah. I told him I wouldn’t tell you. But... Well...” He laughs, reaching for the pack of cigarettes on his dash. “You want to get in, share one of these?” She nods at the offer and walks around the truck, climbing into the passenger seat and leaning back against the headrest with a groan.

“God it feels good to sit down,” she hisses and toes off her shoes, eagerly accepting the smoke and relaxing into it.

“I think I’ll go back tomorrow, just to be sure it’s nothing, if that’s okay with you?” He questions after a moment and watches as she rolls her head lazily towards him.

“You don’t have to - I know this all sounds crazy,” she replies lowly as she twists her hands in her lap. “It’s probably all in my head.”

“I’ve known you long enough to know that you have your moments, Joyce, but this doesn’t seem like one of them. If there’s nothing there again tomorrow, we’ll just have to write it off as one of those things that seems real but isn’t.” Hopper realizes he should tell her the truth but he can’t force himself to do it just yet. He’ll have to tell her eventually, maybe after he finds the kid and takes her somewhere safe, but until then he knows he has to keep it under wraps.

“You know, I don’t know when I started to be like this - “

“Like what?” He interrupts, glancing at her over his shoulder.

“Paranoid. Imagining things. At first I thought it was just Lonnie fucking with my head, you know, the shit he used to pull... But then this,” she says with a sigh, hands exclaiming in the air around her.

“I don’t think it’s all in your head,” he offers slowly, reaching forward and grabbing her hands out of the air. Setting them down on her lap, Hopper sits back against the door to watch the emotions change over her face. “You’re not crazy Joyce. You’re complicated, but not crazy.”

“Are you lying to try to get out of this?” She chides and looks away, her hair falling to curtain her face.

“Nah. I’ve got no skin in the game so why would I lie?” He can’t help but think, even as he says it, that the little white lie he’s telling will bite him in the ass later. But it still doesn’t stop him.

“Thanks Hop. I guess I should get back to work.” She stubs out her cigarette and reaches to get out of the truck, stopping only when Hopper’s hand falls on her shoulder.

“If anything else comes up before tomorrow, give me a call, okay?” He adds, all seriousness returned to his expression as he looks her over. She nods slightly and gives him a smile before climbing down from the truck and heading back to the store.

4. Chapter 4

“Kid,” Hopper barks from the corner, closing the back door to the kitchen with a snap. The girl leaps nearly out of her skin, crouching next to the cupboard doors like a cornered animal.

The trap he’d set had worked, to both their surprise it seemed. Now he wasn’t quite sure what he was going to do, like a dog who finally caught its own tail, but he knew he had to be careful if he wanted to help her.

Crouching down to her level, he sat next to the door and waited until her posture eased and she slid to the ground near the table as far as she could get from him.

“You called us, remember? Why did you call if you didn’t want help?” He asks after a drawn out silence. She shifts before him and looks around, teeth chewing on her lip. “You’re clearly not being looked after. Where’s your dad? The man from the house?”

“No,” she hisses and hides her face in her knees.

“No what? You gotta give - “

“No dad. No call. No!” She shouts and twists her hand in the air until the chairs fall around her. It’s his turn to recoil as he watches her lash out, the movement of the furniture without prompting making his heart stop in his chest.

This girl wasn't normal. This whole thing wasn't normal.

"Jesus," he mutters under his breath, forcing his hand away from where it had instinctually gone towards his gun.

"I want Mama!" She screams a moment later, the dishes from the counter crashing to the floor in an explosion of fury and shattered glass. Hopper shields himself with his arms, cringing away until the commotion stops and he's able to peek over his forearm to see her small form sobbing in the corner.

No matter what she is - who she is - he can't help but realize she's just a child who wanted her mother. Like Sara had been, struggling with the world and the challenges dealt to her. The understanding seems to break a part of him, drawing him across the room until he's pulling the girl into his arms and holding her until her crying subsides.

"It's okay kid," he murmurs into her hair, repeating it until she settles and draws away. He's certain the blood on his arm is somehow from him getting caught up in the fray until he catches sight of her face, the smeared liquid running from her nose and across her cheek. "You're bleeding," he exclaims, lurching forward to the kitchen drawers and pulling them open until he can find a dishcloth. Holding it to her nose, Hopper looks around the destroyed space and sighs heavily.

"Sorry," she groans after a moment, her hand pushing until she can crawl away from him.

“Careful!” He shouts as she nearly steps on a shard of glass, arm coming out in front of her until a chair knocks him over. Groaning, he swears under his breath and grabs at her hand. “There’s glass - you’ll cut your feet.”

She turns and glares at him as he rubs his side, shaking free of his grip with renewed distrust. Her momentary lapse of weakness gone, Hopper struggles to get to his feet before standing away from her and resting his hands on his hips.

“Okay - look. I know you don’t trust me, but I’m all that you’ve got. You can’t keep breaking in here - the owner has already noticed something is up and now you’ve gone and broken her dishware. So. I’ve got a cabin - it’s all yours if you want to stay there until we can find your Mama,” he pauses and scratches a hand through his beard as she stares up at him. “You can’t keep living in the woods. It’s going to start getting cold out... And clearly I can’t call social services, dammit.”

His mind spins as he talks through the plan aloud, questions running through him faster than he can manage as his Tunial starts to wear thin. He’s so caught up in it that he barely notices the haze he’s been under for the past few years starting to clear. It’s nearly twenty minutes later before he’s convinced her into the cab of his truck, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders as he drives them towards his Grandpa’s old hunting cabin.

“What’s your name?” He asks with a side glance, easing away from the stop sign near Joyce’s place and watching her across the seat. She shrugs and looks out the window, holding the blanket tighter around her. “You have to have a name - what did they call you before?”

Sighing, she turns and exposes her arm, eyes like steel as she looks up at him. "Eleven," she states before turning back to the window to lean her head against the glass.

"Who did that to you?" He hisses, renewed tension in his voice as his nail bite into the steering wheel and he tries to reconcile the tattoo on her arm with her age. The rage that's usually masked by the drugs and the frustration of life that typically spurs through him sparks viciously at the idea that this child was someones lab rat.

"Papa," she spits when he doesn't move on, the word hanging like poison in the air.

"That guy from the house? He called you Eleven?" He grinds out before shooting her a look.

"Yes."

"Jesus. Okay. I'm not calling you that. I could call you Jane, but that makes me think of - nevermind. El? How about El? For short?" He struggles to come up with anything better, nothing really suiting this girl who barely speaks. When she doesn't answer he chances a glance and catches the small smile ghosting across her lips, her mouth silently repeating the name as she pulls the blanket up to her chin. He takes that as an acceptance and keeps his eyes on the road until they're pulling up the dirt path a quarter mile from the camp.

"We'll get you settled and then I'll go buy some groceries," he

mumbles as he opens the door to the dark space, ushering her through and into the dusty must of the room.

“Groc-groceries?” She asks tentatively, standing on the threshold as he wanders around the space and turns on the old gas lamps that line the wall.

“Huh? You don’t - groceries mean food. I’m going to get you some food.” He stops what he’s doing and stares at her, his hand pulling the hat off his head and twisting it anxiously as she evaluates the space. “You can - uh - sleep in there. And we can figure out where to start looking for -”

“Mama,” she finishes his sentence and meets her gaze with his, steady as a thin thread of trust spans between them.

“Yes. I guess... It might get chilly tonight. Do you know how to build a fire?” Shaking her head, he steps towards the wood stove and opens the grate to peer inside. “Okay - right. Where do we start?” He spins on his heel and steps determinedly to the kitchen to pull a box of matches out of the cupboard. “Come here - I’ll show you. First, you get some paper or cardboard or something and put it inside. Then you take some wood - the small stuff - and you stack it...” He trails off as he grabs the items, noticing that she’s simply staring at him with a blank look on her face.

He knows then that this is too far out of her reach - she’s not understanding anything really that he’s saying. The thought concerns him, his plan unfurling as he realizes that she won’t be able to stay here on her own, at least not for the first little while until he could teach her how to sustain herself.

“Nevermind. I’ll get it started tonight and then I’ll go get the food and then I’ll come back, okay?” Hopper offers hopefully, kneeling before the stove and preparing to light the fire. When it’s ready he’s surprised to find her hovering over his shoulder, eyes trained on the flame as it flickers it’s first growth.

Together they watch as the smoke curls up into the pipe and the wood starts to catch, the view luring her in and causing her to reach out towards the fire. He grabs at her hand before she can burn it, gently pushing it down once more to her side.

“It will hurt you if you touch it,” he offers carefully, eyes serious as she forces herself not to recoil at his touch. “You can look around. I’ll be back in an hour. You’ll be here when I get back?” She nods and pulls the blanket around her shoulders as he heads back to the door and leaves her alone once more.

5. Chapter 5

He stops first at Melvald's, ducking his head through the door and glancing over to see Joyce at the cash, the store empty around her. She's stitching a hole in a pair of jeans, her attention trained solely on the fabric in her hands until his shadow casts down on her.

"Did you catch the guy?" She quips lightly, smiling up towards him. For a moment he almost tells her everything - about the girl and the man with the white hair - but then he remembers the way her dining room chair had nearly knocked him out cold and he knows he can't tell her about El.

"It was Lonnie," he lies, guilt racking through him despite the fact that he doesn't feel bad about throwing the man under the bus. He only hoped that the last conversation he'd had with Lonnie still scared the guy shitless enough to stay away from her. At least until he could tell her the truth. "He broke some plates when I caught him, but otherwise your place is fine. Should be keeping a wide berth for a while."

Groaning, Joyce sets down the jeans and kicks the counter until she yelps at the pain. "That motherfucker," she hisses between her teeth, covering her face with her hands.

"Hey - no, stop, I already had to calm down one person today, I'm exhausted," he joked before pulling gently at her hands. She looked up at him with a frown, nails biting into her palms.

"At least I'm not crazy, right? Just stuck dealing with a mistake that keeps biting me in the ass!"

“Joyce,” he sighs, squeezing her hand on the counter. He hadn’t foreseen her self-doubt and a small part of him wished he could tell her the truth to save her from herself.

“You don’t have to - it’s fine. Thank you for dealing with him Hopper, I appreciate it. But I’ve got some inventory to do,” she states and grabs the jeans before spinning towards the backroom, tail tucked between her legs.

He watches her go with words on his lips, his thoughts heavy with the truth that he can’t share with her. He knows he should tell her but he can’t bring himself to do it. Not yet. So instead he heads back out to his truck and down the road to the grocery store picking up as much pre-prepared food as he can manage without looking suspicious.

When he’s done there, he heads to the station and grabs the keys to the school to raid the lost and found. Somewhere in between choosing Hungry Man dinners and frozen vegetables he’d realized the kid needed some clothes and it would look too suspicious to start shopping in the children’s section at the local K-mart.

After picking out what looks to be the cleanest clothes of the bunch, he locks up and heads by the trailer to pack a bag and his spare blankets. With a second bag full of camping gear he makes his way back to the trailer and lets himself in to find El sitting on the floor, staring at the door right where he’d left her.

“I have food. And clothes,” he says, offering up the bags in his hands to her stoic look. “I also bought some baby wipes so you can clean up

a bit until I get the water back on.” He hands her the package and she turns it over, her eyes drifting up to his with a furrow in her brow.

Getting to her feet, she hands them back to him and pokes her head through the bags until her hands find the clothes inside, her gaze shooting back up to his. “Mine?” She asks slowly, a pair of overalls in her grip.

“Yeah kid, all yours. I wasn’t kidding about the wipes though,” he sighs and opens the pack, handing her one and taking his own to show her what he means. She follows his movements, cleaning the blood from her face, tentative as she learns something foreign. “Why don’t you get changed - no, not here!” He coughs when she reaches for the hem of her shirt. “The bedroom, your bedroom.”

She takes the bag of clothes and follows him to the small room where he promptly turns and leaves, closing the door until she stops it with her hand. Nodding slightly, he returns to the kitchen and starts pulling the groceries out of the bags and turning on the refrigerator. He’s halfway through warming up the first microwave dinner when she comes back, the overall straps wrapped tightly around her waist. Nearly laughing at the sight, he catches himself and thinks better of it, uncertain of how she would interpret his response.

“You’ve got - your pants. The straps should come over your shoulders, kid,” he says before turning back to the microwave. When he faces her again she’s holding the straps like a backpack, glaring at him. “I’ll show you and then you’re on your own, okay?” She nods and watches intently as he bends over and clips the straps together, stepping back to look at his handiwork as she pushes up the sleeves on her too large flannel.

"I'm - I'm hungry," she mumbles after her clothing is righted, head cocked to the side.

"Good, 'cause I am too. It isn't much, but it'll work tonight. Come sit down," he says and motions to the table, setting down the trays. She sits across from him and stares at the less than appetizing meal, fingers picking at the limp carrots. "It tastes only slightly better than it looks. But it's still edible"

They eat together in silence but for the sound of their forks kitting the trays, the wind outside rattling the windows as the evening rolls in. After, with the kitchen tidied up, Hopper shows her how to stoke the fire and prep it for the night so that she can sleep through without needing to wake up every couple of hours.

Eventually El makes her way into the bedroom with some of the blankets, watching him lounge on the couch from her place curled up in the bed. He dims the lights but keeps the main ones lit, just in case she gets spooked and wakes up overnight.

It's hours later when he wakes up from his place on the couch to find her curled up at his feet, a blanket he hadn't used somehow draped over his torso. In his daze, he finally felt the withdrawal symptoms from the Tunial, his head pounding as his shirt stuck to him from sweat. Uncomfortable and miserable, he moves to his feet slowly before reaching down and lifting El from the couch, depositing her back in her bed.

Slipping on his boots he makes his way out to his truck in the dark, stumbling on roots and trying not to puke with the way his head

spins. Even a cigarette can't right his mind as he trudges his heavy boots through the fallen leaves. He says a small prayer when he gets to the truck and finds the pill bottle he was searching for still half full. In his desperation, he knocks back two pills before hiking back to the cabin in the low moonlight.

Inside he's surprised to find El awake again, standing in front of the couch and staring as he comes through the door. "You should go back to bed," he grumbles, toeing his boots off and struggling to hold himself upright.

"You left," she accuses in return, scornful.

"Only for a minute. I came back, didn't I?" El stares at him until he holds up his hands in defense, shaking his head. "Okay - I'll try to warn you next time," he offers tiredly and then yawns, motioning back to the room. "Really though, El, go get some sleep. I'll be here when you wake up."

And without wavering for the first time in years, he was there when the girl woke up.

6. Chapter 6

A week goes by and Hopper barely notices, his time spent at the cabin and work keeping him sober and relatively unsedated. It's the first truly clear days he's had since coming back to Hawkins and despite the headaches and the creeping effects of the Tunial withdrawal, he's able to get by without reliving Sara's death every night.

The realization slaps him hard one afternoon, his endless paperwork lulling him into a boredom that allows the darkness to overshadow him once more. How could he have forgotten her? His girl?

Dropping the pen from his grip, Hopper rests his head in his hands and tries to breathe through the pain in his chest. A part of him, the kinder part, reminds him that this was bound to happen eventually. That he shouldn't take it so hard. But the mean part shreds his dignity and forces his hand to rifle through the drawers until he pulls out a pill bottle and an old flask.

He's dazed and half conscious when Flo bids him goodnight, his head slow to lift from where it rests on the desk with a Post-It tacked to his cheek. A quick glance at the clock over his desk has him struggling to his feet, grabbing his hat and heading out to his truck even as his deputies try to wave him down.

"You okay to drive, Chief?" Powell shouts from alongside his car, watching as Hopper drags his heels towards his truck.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine," he grumbles and waves the man off, getting into the cab of his truck and leaning against the wheel until Powell

pulls out of the lot. Starting up the truck, Hopper makes it halfway back to his trailer before he turns around as he realizes he needs to head to the cabin to help El get settled for the night.

Exhausted and almost back to where he started, he hisses a small “Goddammit” and puts the truck into park on the side of the road. It’s sometime later that a knock on the window rouses him from his sleep, eyes blinking as he looks out at the figure in the dark.

“Hop?” Joyce’s voice calls through the window, hands fighting to open the door while she struggles to hold a flashlight in his face. “Oh my god, Hop,” she exclaims when he releases the locks, her skin white as a sheet as she opens the door and looks in on him. “I thought you were dead! I’ve been knocking for almost ten minutes!”

“Sorry Joyce, not dead,” he sighs, twisting in his seat to face her and dragging the flashlight she holds away from his eyes.

“What are you even doing out here? I haven’t seen or heard from you in days and I find you out here passed out behind the wheel. You’re lucky it was me that found you and not someone else! You’re the Chief-of-fucking-Police Hop and you’re getting shitfaced and driving around?” Her words spill out of her in a jumbled mess, ripping through him until the self-loathing breaks through the drink and the drugs.

“I’m not drunk and you don’t have to lecture me,” he snaps and reaches for the door. Her hand jerks forward and grabs it, stopping his movement.

“You scared me. I was worried something had happened - Oh,” Joyce pauses when the tears fill his eyes and he has to blink them quickly away. Even in the low light he can’t hide the way his face crumbles and his emotions take over him.

It’s over almost as quickly as it starts, a huffing breath into his lungs making him sit up straight and dig his thumbs into his eye sockets until the physical pain takes over. Joyce watches the mask slide back into place with her hands resting on his knees, a frown across her features.

“I gotta go,” he says when he’s certain his voice will be steady again. There was no way he could be on time like he’d promised this morning, but he needed to at least try to cut down on how late he was going to be.

“Do you need me to drive you back to your trailer? I don’t like the idea of you driving around like this - “

“I’m not going to my trailer,” he interrupts and then freezes, gaze sinking to the ground at the recognition of his slip. Joyce’s hands recoil from him almost instantly, her posture stiffening as she looks at the ground, at the sky, anywhere but at him.

“Okay. Well, I guess - “

“Joyce, it’s not - I mean,” he struggles to find the lie that’s closest to the truth but his mind is foggy with misery and pain and he can’t form the words to make it right. When she looks back at him after a drawn out silence her eyes are squinted and she’s biting her lip in the

way she used to during arguments back in high school.

“You don’t owe me anything, Hop.” Her voice shakes and he can see that it’s taking everything in her to stand before him with her shoulders back and her chin held high. “You can sleep where - with whoever you want. I only want you to... To not die in a crash because you’re too fucked up to take a night off.”

When he doesn’t say anything to that, offers no quick words of rebuttal, she runs a hand through her hair and sighs while murmuring under her breath. She’s nearly out of reach, her body stepping backwards more with every breath, when he finally reaches his hand to graze her shoulder and lets the unsaid words between them cloud the air.

“I know it’s been hard and that I can’t even imagine what it feels like, but I hear about what you’ve been doing. I try to stay out of it, it isn’t my business, but I just want you to know that I’m here if you need me. I’m right here, Jim.” She finishes and wraps her arms around her waist, eyes gentle as they search his for something neither of them can name.

“I wish - “ He curls in on himself and then expands until he’s looking down at her, clarity coming into his expression. “Nevermind. Thank you for stopping. I’ll be okay tonight.”

Both of them know it’s a lie, but neither of them say it.

“Alright. Will you at least give me a call when you get wherever you’re going? Let me know you’re there?” She sighs out, feeling like a

parent negotiating with her son about his first time driving on his own.

“Yeah. I can do that for you,” he nods and shifts to face once more through the front window. With one final glance over at her, he reaches for the door and closes it gently, gaze following her as she heads slowly back to her car.

The drive to the cabin is slow and he has to force his mind to focus on anything but the thoughts that have plagued him all afternoon. He turns the music up loud enough to drown things out, hands steady on the wheel as he makes the final turns down the old dirt road. His presence at the cabin is noted almost instantly, the door slapping open as he turns the knob.

“Where? Where?” El jerks up from the table, little form vibrating as her fists clench. Hopper can’t bear to keep eye contact with her and instead looks away, pulling his hat from his head as he fights to untie the knots in his boots. “You leave - and I stay. And we never find Mama!”

“Not tonight El,” he groans and steps free from his boots, unclipping his belt and leaving it on the counter. When it whips across the room, his handcuffs crashing against the wall, he spins towards the girl and stares at her with wide eyes.

If he had paid attention he would have seen this coming over the last few days - the slow build of the way she glared at him when he wasn’t looking or the way she closed the door a little too hard every night. But he’d brushed it off, wrote it off as exhaustion and unfamiliarity, only now to be caught off guard when she reared back and lashed out. He should have been here for her. Like he was for

Sara.

“Mama,” she wails until her voice cracks. Hands over his ears, defeated, Hopper waits until her tears break loose and her body slumps forward onto her knees before he moves in to surround her with his arms, his own tears coming back in full force as he pulls her close.

They huddle together on the floor, two broken souls just trying to get through the day without falling apart under their pain. When eventually he pulls back and looks down at her, he forces his mind to push away the recognition of the broken glass covering the floor and the flurry of feathers still floating overhead from her earlier explosion.

“We’ll start looking tomorrow, okay? I’m sorry it’s not tonight. I just - I can’t tonight,” he adds with a sigh. Dragging in a heavy breath and steadying her features, her small hands reach out to brush against his cheeks, expression pensive as she watches him.

“Sad?” She asks slowly, gaze searching. He twists away in embarrassment, abruptly getting back to his feet and opening the fridge to see what he could scrounge together for their dinner.

“It’s nothing,” he adds when she stays rooted to the spot, watching him move around the kitchen.

“Don’t lie,” she counters and pulls her knees into her chest. The familiar blood under her nose is wiped away as she absently scrubs at her face, eyes never leaving him.

Next to the counter he sighs as he puts the microwave pizza down, turning back towards her and frowning. "It's been a hard day. I just want to get you settled so I can -"

"Leave?"

"Yes. Sleep in my own bed and not on the couch. You'll be here okay by yourself tonight," he adds when she stares at him with an incredulous look. Turning back to the pizza, he pops it in the microwave and swears under his breath. "I need to make a phone call - don't say anything for a minute, okay?"

Huffing out her displeasure, she gets to her feet and stomps towards her room, slamming the door closed so hard that the windows shake in their panes. Hopper lets it slide, picking up the receiver and dialing Joyce's number quickly.

"Hello?" A boy's voice answers, excitement audible through the line. "Dad - is that you? 'Cause mom isn't home yet so -"

"No, Will, it's Hopper. Your mom isn't home yet?" He questions the boy, mind spinning into overdrive. Even if she'd made some stops on the way, she should have been home by now. She should be the one answering the phone.

And why was Lonnie calling?

“Oh, sorry Chief. She’s out on a date - er, I mean, she’s out for the evening,” he replies and scrambles to cover the truth he’s shared. Hopper tries not to focus on it - tries to shove it away and forget the boy had even said anything - but the knowledge curdles his stomach and makes him recoil at the heaviness inside of him.

“It’s okay - look, if she asks, tell her I’m all good. She’ll know what I’m talking about. Have a good night,” he adds lamely and hangs up the phone when the line goes dead. Behind him the microwave’s beeping pulls him from his reverie and he turns to plate the small helpings of pizza for him and El.

They sit down to eat with no fanfare and soon after Hopper escapes home to lick his wounds in peace, the kid frowning as he closes the door behind him.

7. Chapter 7

“Do you remember where you were before the house?” Hopper asks as he sits across from El at the cabin’s kitchen table. His head pounds as he runs through a list of questions, recording the few words he can drag out of her. The morning had gone slowly, his efforts hindered as he tried to prepare his file to start searching for her mother.

“Dark. Empty.” She replies hollowly and twists her head against her knees to look towards him. Somehow she’d managed to curl further into herself in the last hour, words barely above a whisper.

“Was it another house? One with your Mama?” She shakes her head at the question and he sighs heavily, rubbing his forehead. “So it was a dark place that didn’t have any furniture. Like a warehouse?”

“Ware - house?” Her brow furrows and she closes her eyes, expression softening as her lids flutter closed and flicker as though in a dream.

“Yeah - like a big empty space, maybe with - “

“Shh,” she hisses, interrupting him and lifting her hand up. He pauses, holding his breath as a bead of blood leaks out of her nose. The sight concerns him and he sits up straighter, fingers tightening on the pen he holds.

He hadn’t really seen anything like it before, her breathing stiffening with every second that her eyes were closed. It was almost a minute

before she sat up abruptly and stared at him, gaze stricken.

“Lab. White walls. Rainbow room. MKUltra,” El states. Sitting back in his chair, Hopper tries to slow the jump in his heart rate with steady breaths, the words ominous as she repeats them again. “Can’t go back,” she adds after a moment, swiping at the blood on her lip with her fist.

“Don’t worry kid - you aren’t going back to any lab,” he mumbles and leans forward to write down the words, the last phrase raising the hair on the back of his neck.

Hopper hadn’t heard the term MKUltra since his stint in Vietnam, the idea of it hanging heavy on his memory even until this day. He thought he’d wiped it clear, had finally come out from under its weight, but her utterance had brought it all screaming back to the surface as he took a sip from his cracked coffee mug.

The memory pulled its way to the surface, thick and caustic, as he struggled to think of the next question. It was no use. He was back in the jungle, breathing in the humid air and smelling the rancid stench of bodies long forgotten. Behind him there were screams from a village that was under the press of the army’s thumb, ‘experiments’ being run on the new gasses they were testing. Monsters of creation, they’d called the program.

“Hopper?” El whispers, standing beside him and shaking his shoulder.

“Huh?” He snaps after a moment, pen scratching across the page.

"You were gone." She frowns as she says it and he knows she's picking up on more than just his dazed expression. El knew that her words meant something more to him too. Gone like she sometimes was. Gone and lost.

"Yeah. Sorry. I got distracted. What more do you know?" He sniffs again and the air is clear, no longer hinting of the dirt and death that had entrapped him.

"515 Larrabee Road."

He looks up at that, hand dropping to the table as she gives him a tangible, *real*, piece of information. "Where did that address come from?" He asks carefully, turning to face her full on.

"I don't - address?" The question has him nearly laughing, the reality of her lack of worldly experience hitting him full force. No wonder he was getting so little from her - she didn't know how to communicate what she did know to him, at least not with any certainty. Though she seemed to understand most of what he was saying, he couldn't ignore that it was a struggle for her to formulate the right answers. It was the kind of thing that came from hearing orders, not having conversations.

"What you just said kid, that's an address. Maybe of a business, or the lab, or maybe home. It could be anything. But it's something I can go check out," he adds when still she stares at him, a furrow in her brow. "Let's take a break for lunch. I'll go to the station after that and see if I can find where this place is."

After two sandwiches and an awkward conversation about what a septic system was, Hopper climbs into his truck and heads towards town to put the search into action. It's an hour later that he's pulling up to the library, the station's records being useless to tracking down the address. Inside Cindy Hamil sits behind the front desk, her glasses resting low on her nose as she glances up at him and scoffs loudly. Too loud for a library, at least.

"Hey Cin, sorry to - "

"Look what the cat dragged in. I thought you'd gone and died alone in your trailer when I didn't hear from you," she hisses, eyes scanning the lobby before she gets to her feet. Straightening her clothes, Cindy removes her glasses and slides them onto the collar of her shirt, the cut sinking lower and reminding him of just why he'd taken her home those months ago.

"Yeah - I meant to call," he starts and shrugs, sheepish as he removes his hat.

"You've been a terrible liar since grade school, Jim, don't bother trying to cover your ass now. Is this a social call or do did you just come here to drag filth through my place of business?" Her words strike him as harsh, even as he realizes that he probably deserved her scorn. Still though, he knows he has to ask for her help in order to find this place for El.

"Work, actually. I need to find an address but it isn't in the records at the office," he starts, pulling his paper from his pocket and unfurling it for her. She takes it with the tips of her fingers and sighs, waving

him past the counter and towards the back of the library.

The microfiche machines are tucked in the corner, the low light hard on his eyes as he settles in to scroll through hours of pages of old documents. Thankfully Cindy leaves him after a failed attempt at starting up another conversation, his interest focused entirely on finding out what he can for El. He's so entrenched in the search that he barely notices the shadow over his shoulder until the hand settles there, nearly causing him to jump out of his skin.

"Sorry Hop," Joyce laughs, leaning down and staring at the screen and the records he's scrolling through. "What are you looking for?"

Instinctively he closes the search, hands fumbling as though he hadn't meant to do it. "Shit - Joyce," he stops and turns to face her, standing up abruptly. "I didn't hear you come over!"

"Oh, well, I didn't mean to disturb you. I'm just here with Will - he wanted to pick-up a book for school and I saw you and figured I'd come over and say hi. So - Hi." She steps back as he towers over her, the oversized sweater she wears engulfing her and emphasizing the frazzled look that always seems to hover about her.

"Good - good. I was just - uh, looking up something for a project I'm working on," he offers carefully and leans over to grab his hat off the table. Her eyes never leave his face as her expression tightens, inquisitiveness sparking in her eye.

"Anything I can help with? I always was the better researcher between the two of us." Her offer has his edges softening, his smile

light as he shakes his head.

“Nah, that’s okay. It’s kind of a thing I’ve gotta do on my own. I appreciate the offer though,” he replies and lifts his hand to brush against her forearm, heat flooding through him at the contact. The move is so unusual, so unlike him, that when the voice from the shelves echoes out to his consciousness he has to snap his hand away like he’d been caught in the cookie jar.

“Joyce, you ready to go?” Bob Newby asks as he comes around the aisles and notices them in the corner. “Chief! Good to see you. How are you doing?” The man sidles up beside Joyce and wraps his arm around her shoulder, pulling her close in a way that looks so natural Hopper could almost puke.

“Is Will ready?” Joyce questions and steps out from his embrace, her reaction so much like the girl he knew who shied away from public affection that he nearly laughed out loud at the move.

“Almost - he’s just checking out.” Bob finishes and looks between the two of them, a knowing look evident in his expression.

“I’ve gotta head out, a meeting at the station. Good to see you Bob,” Hopper breaks his silence and nods to the man, eyes quickly meeting Joyce’s before nodding and stepping past them.

He disappears out the front doors of the library and into the fresh air, sucking back a breath as the confusion clouds his mind. There was too much going on to think about what had just happened, how that small gesture had echoed through him and shook him to the core.

Slipping his hat back on his head he took off towards his truck at a renewed pace, getting behind the wheel and heading to the station for another couple hours of staring at old maps trying to find Larrabee Road.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you to all those lovely people who keep reading and commenting - I appreciate it so much and I'm glad you're enjoying it. It makes it much easier to press on even when my brain is telling me to quit <3

8. Chapter 8

The nightmare that strikes the cabin later that week rocks Hopper out of his cot and to his feet, the space around him shivering as the howl from the bedroom surrounds him. He's across the space in an instant, opening the door to find El tangled in her blankets and sobbing in her sleep.

"El, hey kid," he soothes, careful to only brush her shoulder with his hand as he tries to rouse her. When she doesn't wake, when she only curls further into herself, he kneels on the mattress and turns her until she's facing him, blood stained and trapped in her own mind. "Come on El, come back."

Her lids snap open abruptly at that, her hand shooting out and his body tumbling backwards until he's against the wall with a pressure at his neck that makes his eyes pop. It's only a brief second that he's trapped but it's enough to have him wheezing and coughing in the instant she releases him, his frame falling to the floor in shock. He has to force himself to remember that she was just a kid, one who didn't know her strength, caught up in something she couldn't control.

"No no no," she cries out, crawling to the edge of the bed and shaking her head at him. "I'm sorry - Hopper - I'm sorry!"

Grunting, he lifts a hand into the air and shakes his head, other hand rubbing at his throat to ease the strain that was no longer there. "S'okay," he rasps, getting to his knees. The adrenaline that had flooded him moments earlier tasted like blood in his mouth and he had to swallow thickly before he could get back to his feet.

"I'm sorry," El moans, the oversized t-shirt that she wears making her look tiny in comparison to the power she's just displayed.

"I'm okay, El. Are you okay?" He questions when he's able to stand again, careful not to get too close to avoid making her feel more uncomfortable than she already was. Hopper could see the fear and sadness in her look, the realization striking him and bringing him back to his knees beside the bed.

"It was Mama. Papa got her," she whispers as she stares at him head on. Her expression softens as the memory clouds back in, gaze sinking to the floor. "He hurt her."

"He hurt her?" He questions, concern evident as he ducks to catch her line of sight. Nodding, she sits back and rubs the back of her hand across her face, smearing the drying blood until it crosses her face.

"Her head. He hurt her head." The words tumble out of her as he watches her carefully, mind spinning with the possibilities of what she's saying.

"Do you remember anything else from your dream? What the place looked like or if someone else was there?" She shakes her head as her expression crumbles, tears coming hotly to her cheeks. "Don't cry. We will find her, I promise you that."

"Promise?" El counters between controlled breaths, her desperation

to hold herself together clear as she looks cautiously at him.

“Yeah kid. I promise. You think you can get back to sleep tonight?” Shaking her head, she twists the blanket in her grip until it frays and the knit comes loose. Hopper takes it from her and grabs her hand, getting off the floor with a huff and a groan. “Let’s go work on the puzzle for a bit. I don’t feel much like sleeping again either.”

The morning comes and Hopper can’t help but feel like the past years of sedation and short-temperedness had convinced everyone around him that his need for coffee and quiet were normal and required in the morning. Walking into the station the next day, black rings under his eyes, has Flo jumping to her feet and scrambling to get his coffee ready and in his hand before the morning briefing.

It was mid-afternoon before he felt like he was finally able to cut out and head into town, his first stop to the coffee shop and his second to pick up some home comforts from Melvald’s for El. He doesn’t even consider how he looks when he walks through the door, Joyce’s shocked yelp a mix of surprise and embarrassment as she leaps away from Bob’s embrace.

“I ain’t here to arrest you for public indecency,” he mumbles and averts his eyes, disappearing down an aisle as she rights her work uniform. He’s looking absently at the pet food, unaware in his dazed state, when Joyce comes to join him as the bell over the door jingles.

“You won’t tell Donald, will you?” She asks lowly, glaring at him.

“Of course I won’t,” he scoffs and turns away from the petfood to

head further down the aisle. A small petty side of him wishes Joyce would go back to the till and leave him in peace but he knows it's just the sleep deprivation. And maybe a hint of jealousy he hadn't realized had been sparking since that scene at the library.

"Thanks. I'm trying to convince him to give me a raise and this would just - "

"It's fine Joyce, I'm not going to say anything," he interrupts and turns to head into the kid's section, the place he'd managed to avoid for as long as he'd been back in Hawkins. It doesn't surprise him that Joyce follows, brows furrowed as she looks between his stoic face and the colours of the latest toy selection.

"I appreciate that. Bob's a good man. He treats me right and I need that... He's nice to the boys which, really - "

"I'm happy for you," he sighs, shooting her a look before turning back to the shelves before him and hoping she takes the hint.

She doesn't. "I think you'd like him more if you just had a conversation with him - "

"I don't have an issue with him. I knew Bob the Brain when we were kids, Joyce," he cuts in. Her flurry of half-finished words nearly rouses a laugh from him before his eye is caught by a small stuffed animal on the top shelf. Reaching up he plucks it from its place, drawing it closer for careful consideration.

“Who’s that for?” Joyce asks as he twists the tag in his fingers absently. Hesitating, he sets the animal back on the shelf and shrugs, careful not to spin a lie he couldn’t keep straight.

“Got any toilet paper?” He grumbles instead, knowing full well where the household papers were kept but hoping to distract her from his slip up. She gives him a look that conveys more than she dare say, her expression always having a way of telling him off without saying a word.

“Back corner, just where it’s always been. You know, one day Hop, you’re going to need my help and you’re going to let me in on whatever is bothering you these last few days.”

Grimacing, he rubs his hand through his beard and debates for the smallest of seconds about telling her everything. He knows he can’t, not yet. Maybe not ever. But the want is still there. Joyce had always been good at keeping his secrets, even when they didn’t work in her favour. Especially when they didn’t work in her favour.

“I know. You always were good for me, Joyce. It’s just been a rough couple days is all,” he adds as she rounds the end of the aisle, stopping mid-stride to look back at him over her shoulder.

“I’ll see you at the cash,” she replies before disappearing, leaving him with his thoughts.

Notes for the Chapter:

Happy mom day to all those out there, no matter your status. If you think of yourself that way, then you are and this day is for you. Even if you aren't,

whatever, I hope you're having a good day too!

9. Chapter 9

With no other avenue available to him, Hopper makes the decision to take El out of hiding and for a drive through town. He comes to the idea after he leaves one morning, her forlorn look as he departs dragging on his heartstrings until he stops his departure and returns to the front door.

“Come on kid,” he says as he opens the door, motioning for her to join him. Elated, she jumps from her chair at the table and hurries to grab a coat and her shoes, stumbling onto the porch in her excitement a few minutes later.

Together they head to the truck with no words exchanged between them, Hopper unsure of what to say other than that they were breaking his rules and he couldn't quite rationalize why.

Twenty minutes later he was radioing Flo at the station and telling her he would be late, his truck instead driving along the highways outside of town with El peering out the windows and intermittently watching to see if she recognized anything.

They spent nearly the entire morning driving around the county, the kid's eyes wide as she finally saw the world outside the place she'd lived all these years and the inside of the cabin he'd relegated her to. Not much was said in those hours but Hopper promised himself that he would get her out again, not just for driving in search of Larrabee but to see the world that she had been starved of growing up. His instinct to protect wavered against his instinct to let her grow and become more than just some girl with strange powers that couldn't be explained.

“I’ve got to take you home now,” Hopper mumbles as they round back onto the road that leads to the cabin, El’s attention perking as she recognizes the familiarity of the place.

“Why?” She counters, twisting in her seat.

“‘Cause I gotta go to work and I can’t take you,” he replies and she nods, standing down without questions at his answer. He returns her to the cabin and she sighs once she’s back inside, slow to remove her shoes and plopping herself heavily onto the couch as he closes the door.

The rest of the week goes in a similar manner. Hopper takes her out for an hour or two each morning before work with the excuse of trying to find her home but in reality just hoping to expose her to as many things as he can before He doesn’t like to think of what comes after this. Either he finds her home or... He hasn’t quite figured out what comes next. She couldn’t go into the system, not with the powers that she’s displayed. It would be disastrous. So he doesn’t like to think of it if he can avoid it. He keeps her hidden while fighting to show her everything she’s missed out on, if only for now.

On Friday he brings home a TV, setting it up and trying to figure out the best way to boost the signal to cut through the trees. They turn it into a project, Hopper teaching El what he knows in small bite form ways that he can see her retaining as the days wear on.

It’s late Saturday night when a sound rouses Hopper from his sleep, dragging him to a sitting position with a fuzzy mind and senses

struggling to catalogue what woke him. He's surprised then to see El standing in her doorway, eyes wide as she looks around the cabin.

"What woke you up?" He asks from his place on the cot, getting slowly to his feet to join her.

"I thought... A noise," she replies weakly, shrugging and looking at her feet. He doesn't believe her, but he knows her reluctance to say could be that she didn't know how to explain it so he doesn't hold it against her.

"Inside or outside?" He pries further, grabbing his jacket from the back of the couch.

"Outside. Up there." She motions to the roof and Hopper looks up reactively, as though he could see what she was pointing at.

"Alright. I'll go check it out. Sit tight in here," he mumbles and heads out the door and into the forest. He circles the cabin once, twice, and sees nothing on the building that would have woken them up. It's only as he heads back to the front door that he notices the footprints in the mud along the side of the building, their size larger than El's but smaller than his own. The realization has him tracking them through the trees and to a place in the driveway where another set of tires have recently rested.

Back inside the cabin he lies, telling El that it's nothing but closing the blinds on all of the windows to keep whoever had been wandering around outside from seeing what the interior of the cabin looked like. When she's finally back asleep he stays up for a few more

hours, laying in the bed and turning over the options in his mind.

It must be the man she describes as 'Papa'. Who else would know she was here? Obviously no one else was looking for her otherwise he would have received reports at the station. No. This had to be the people who had experimented on her. The ones who had locked her away and stolen her childhood from her. Maybe they'd seen them out driving. Or they'd followed him home on a hunch.

The thought kept him awake most of the night and when morning rolled around he was miserable, exhausted and wishing he could spend the day sleeping it off like a bad hangover or an afternoon drifting in the grip of medications. But he couldn't do that. Not now with El to look after.

Instead they spend the afternoon securing the cabin, Hopper leading the charge on teaching her how to set traps and setting up new rules to keep her safe inside the building. She soaks it in like a sponge, following in his footsteps without question.

When the evening rolls around again both of them collapse into bed early, the sun barely having set but their bodies worn out. No sound wakes either of them that night and when Hopper wakes up refreshed and tolerable, he says a small prayer hoping that the security they'd implemented would be enough.

The rides stop after that. Hopper hates that he has to make that decision but he knows he has no choice. El must realize it too because she doesn't protest when he heads to work on Monday without their usual trip out of the cabin. He tries in other ways to ensure that she gets more exposure to the world, showing her how to work the TV and bringing home newspapers and digging out Sara's

children's books that he kept stored in the cellar of the cabin in the box marked for his little girl.

He's on a call a few days after the noise in the night when Callahan finally brings up the question Hopper had tried to avoid since finding El in the forest those weeks ago.

"Chief, you remember that weirdo from the day of the storm?" Callahan asks as he wanders through the kitchen that has been ransacked.

"Which one?" Hopper deflects, examining the door for signs of broken entry.

"The kid. The one who took off into the forest when you were trying to bring it in."

"Yeah, what about her?" Keeping his attention towards the door, he stuffs down the panic that crawls through him.

"Well, you don't think it could do this, do you? I mean, what kind of kid runs off when someone is trying to help them?"

"Maybe she was afraid. Maybe she went home," he offers weakly and Callahan laughs, scoffing.

"Sure, sure. Met up with that crazy guy she was with and they just

lived happily ever after like forest hobos,” Callahan crowed, coming over and slapping Hopper on the shoulder. “So you don’t think this is that kid?”

“Nah. They must be long gone by now.”

“What about the Byers house then? Isn’t this a pattern from that?” Hopper snaps his head up at that, scowling.

“That was determined to be Lonnie. Why you on the case of this girl?” He counters, standing up fully. The shadow passing over Callahan’s face and the man’s withdrawal causes Hopper to freeze, careful to draw back his accusations.

“It was a girl? But it’s head was shaved,” Callahan questions after a moment, discarding the fact about Lonnie altogether.

“Wasn’t it? I thought it was,” Hopper replies and pointedly steps around the man and towards the living room where the resident who had complained about the break-in was sitting. “Mrs. Samuels, we’re going to write this up but it looks like whoever did this to your kitchen had a key. There’s no sign of a break-in at the doors or at the windows.”

The woman huffs and throws her hands into the air, shaking her head. “But I saw a man outside yesterday. White hair, about ye high,” she pauses and rests her hands on her hips angrily. “Chief, you need to find that man. I’m sure he’s the one who came in here and tore up my home!”

“A man with white hair?” Callahan breaks in from behind Hopper, his notebook in his hand and his pen flying across the page.

“Yep! He was poking through my shed and when I yelled at him he ran off into the trees like some kind of wild animal. I thought it was weird but didn’t report it because you know the people round here, they’ve always been a bit on the kooky side. Now I don’t even want to sleep here tonight!” She seethes, hands exclaiming as she describes the event.

“Do you have anywhere else you could stay, maybe - “

“My sister Cathy. She’s just up state an hour or two, I’m sure she wouldn’t mind the visit,” she sighs heavily and drops her hands, head shaking.

“Good idea. I’ll have the shifts for the next couple days circle around here and keep an eye on the place for you. When you get back, check in alright?” Hopper finishes and returns his hat to his head. The look she gives him is one he’s used to by now - that of a disappointed woman tired of his shit - but there’s nothing he can do. He knows it must be ‘Papa’, but what did the guy want?

Notes for the Chapter:

Ack, sorry this is slow to come out and shorter than I’d like. Work has been insane (the world is falling apart) and I had written a chapter that branched the story off where I didn’t want it to go yet, so I had to re-route it. Hopefully you’re still with me!

10. Chapter 10

“Oh!” Joyce startles, stepping back from where she’d collided with his chest. She’d been leaving the washroom just as he’d been lighting a cigarette in the hallway, both distracted as they stumble into one another.

Quick hands shoot out to grab her shoulders, his large palms easily holding her upright as she finds her footing and looks up at him through the haze of smoke. “Hey,” he mumbles around his cigarette, letting his hands linger a moment too long before pulling them back to his sides. He sticks them in his pockets, just to be safe, and tries to lean nonchalantly against the wall.

“You know, I thought I’d find you here, but then Tommy behind the bar said you’d stopped coming by regularly a while ago and I gave up hope,” Joyce greets with a soft smile, her eyes unfocused as she looks up at him.

Hopper tries to brush away the concern that picks at him - Joyce was a grown woman and she could enjoy a few drinks like any other adult. Besides, who was he to judge? He was the one who’d signalled back to the cabin just so he could have one hour to himself to think through what he was going to do with this mess he’d gotten himself in to.

He hadn’t come here to drink, he’d told himself. Repeatedly. But the habit had returned easily and too soon after arriving he’d been nearly five drinks in and teetering on the edge of drunk. Thankfully he’d had the mind to switch to coffee soon after, knocking back two cups before drinking a fair share of water. He knew he couldn’t go back to the cabin drunk - not just because he had no ride - but because El

didn't deserve that. So he'd been hanging out at a corner table, hat over his eyes as he rested against the wall. At least he had been, until he'd retreated down the hallway for a smoke.

The last few weeks since bringing El back to the cabin, Hopper had been trying his best not to drag her down with the misery he'd been wallowing in since coming back to Hawkins. In truth it had been a battle - a constant fight with sobriety and withdrawal that hadn't given up easily. But he'd been winning lately, his reliance on pills having stopped and his drinking mostly under control. At least until tonight -

"Earth to Hopper!" Joyce laughs, her hand pressing against his ribs as she waves her other hand in his face.

"Sorry - it's been a week," he replies lamely and shrugs, a lazy hand coming up to circle her wrist and bring it down between them. He thinks about letting go, knows he should let her go, but the heat of her so close to him is like a warm blanket in the cold and he can't do it. Not just yet.

"S'okay. I was saying that you should come join us - it's Karen's birthday and we're having a couple drinks to celebrate in the back room. Ted and Bob are here and Karen's sister Sar - " Joyce freezes on the name, her mouth opening and closing with no words escaping as her brow furrows.

The pieces click into place slowly at that, his grip loosening on her wrist until his hand falls away and the loss of her rings through him, the pain of what she had been about to say lingering between them. Sara. *Sara* .

"I'm - " she pauses, starts, stops, glances towards the rest of the bar and runs a hand through her wild hair.

"It's okay," he offers lowly, plucking his cigarette from his lips and stubbing it out under his boot. When he looks up from the floor she's already wrapped her arms around herself tightly, her joyful mood from earlier tarnished as she looks up at him with pity.

It's that look that makes his gut churn, burning through him like a fire that licks up his neck and into the back of his skull. It's the same one that everyone gave him back before the divorce, when the end was in sight and everyone could see what was coming now that they had no child and no will to keep fighting to be together.

The memory of that feeling pushes him through the bar and into the cool night air, puffs of fog escaping from him as the anxiety rolls across his chest and makes it harder to breathe. The sight of the moon overhead and the stillness of the street helps, calming him as he leans against the red brick facade and lets the wave of hurt pass over him.

Only a moment has gone by before Joyce is rushing through the door and flying into the street, her head frantically glancing in both directions for something before swearing softly under her breath and turning on her heel. Almost startled to see him, she jumps and squeaks at the sight before walking carefully back to the sidewalk, eyes downcast.

"I thought you'd left," she says lowly, refusing to look up.

"I'm going to. I just needed a minute first." He did need to go, but her presence kept him rooted to the spot.

"I didn't mean to upset you - I thought maybe you'd like to meet her, or - "

"It's fine, really. I hear Sara's name all the time now so it isn't as fresh as it once was. I can deal with it," he interjects hoping to save her from her fumbling guilt. He couldn't stand to see her curl inward and beat herself up, especially not for something as small as saying a name. "Joyce," he sighs, lifting his hand to her chin when she doesn't look up.

"I've had a lot to drink and I'm afraid to say anything else that will upset you," she whispers, wide eyes blinking up at him as she finally meets his gaze. His thumb slides along her jaw briefly and for a moment, a blistering and instinctive second, he tilts his head down and wets his lips as she leans up on her toes.

"Joyce! Your coat - " Bob breaks through their bubble and they both jump away, cheeks burning but shadowed in the evening light. If the man notices anything amiss, he doesn't mention it before wrapping her coat around her shoulders. "Chief! Are you going to come in and join us? It's quite the shindig happening!"

Hopper looks down at Joyce once more and plasters on a smile, shaking his head as he looks up towards Bob. "Not tonight. I've got a prior engagement I'm already late for. You kids have fun though - make sure she gets home safe, alright?"

“Sure thing - I’m the Designated Driver so I’ve got it under control. Have a good night!” Bob adds with a laugh and wraps his arm around Joyce’s shoulder before steering her back inside.

The groan that escapes him as he starts the trek towards his truck leaves him empty, frustration and want prickling at his senses as he tries to tell himself he was being an idiot. Joyce was happy with Bob - he shouldn’t fuck that up. He’d had years to make a move and he should have done it then... But who was he kidding? He’d been drowning until now, barely keeping his head afloat as he lost himself. He’d been in no place to make a move, even if he’d been circulating in the same realm as her for some time. It’d only been now that his mind was clearer, that his intentions were understandable, that he’d started to see Joyce as something that could be good for him.

“Goddammit,” he grumbles to himself as he collapses heavily into his truck, the alcohol having dissipated enough to let the thoughts roar back into his mind and surround him. He couldn’t get lost in this now. It was a lose-lose situation and he needed to focus on finding El’s mother before time ran out and they were discovered.

When Hopper arrives back to the cabin, distracted and rough around the edges, he’s surprised to find El sitting on the floor, Sara’s music box open and playing in her palms with the items he’d saved from his daughter’s room scattered around her. It’s a cruel twist of fate - another knife cutting at his already whisper thin skin. The sight makes him freeze up as he steps through the door, the sound and the memory of it all hitting him like a brick in the chest.

“Hopper?” She asks tentatively, setting the box down as though it were precious. When he doesn’t answer she gets to her feet and steps

around the items lightly, careful to never tread on anything.

“Just - give me a minute,” he gasps and closes the door, his back pressed against the wood as he looks out towards the trees. Again he finds himself fighting to keep centered, outward looking and desperate for something to latch onto. The grief ripples through him and has his breath catching in his lungs, his hands coming up to press into his eyes until he sees stars. This was too much for tonight. Too much to process after the events of the last hour.

Seeing El with Sara’s things is like opening an old wound, one that seethes and moves caustically through his waking mind. The images that flash in his head are overlays of Sara, some of El, smiling and listening to the music, another world far from the one he lives in.

Taking a couple minutes to right his head, Hopper fights his way back from the brink and walks back into the cabin to find the items cleaned up. Everything but the music box, held tightly in El’s hand.

“Okay?” She questions, watching him carefully.

“Yeah, you can keep it,” he mumbles in return, taking off his jacket and hanging it on the hook behind the door. It hurts, but somehow he manages.

“No,” she calls, stepping closer until she’s nearly at his side. “You - okay?”

He pauses at that, looking up from where he's crouched over his boots to see her watching him steadily, brow furled. "Yeah kid, I'll be okay." That seems to ease her mind and she turns to the cupboard, starting to pull out some microwave popcorn that she offers up towards him. The move forces a smile to his lips, one that grows wider as she bounces excitedly towards the microwave.

Maybe this was what was meant to be. Maybe she was here to help him come back from the brink, if only through helping her find her way back home.

Notes for the Chapter:

A bit more Jopper tucked in this one. Hope you like it!

11. Chapter 11

“I want to go over everything again, El,” he states late one night as they scrounge to finish the final quarter of the puzzle they’d been working on. Her attention is drawn towards putting the pieces together, hands quickly placing things with an ease that astounds him. He knows it’s not the best time - surely there were better moments - but it’s been almost two months since she’d come out of the forest and a growing doubt had been looming over him with every day that passed.

“Every what?” She questions, distracted.

“What was happening at that house, before the storm that day. Why were you and Papa there? Why did he leave you behind?” It’s a lot to ask, he knows, but it needs to be addressed.

“Papa wanted me to find my sister from the Rainbow Room.” Sitting up slowly, Hopper focused on unfurling his fist, his palms pressing into the solid wood of the table instead. A sister? She hadn’t mentioned a sister before and the possibility that there was another child out there, alone, ran through him like a chill. “She ran away and I saw her there so we went. We went through the trees.”

Leaning back in his chair he kept his mouth shut as she recalled what little she could vocalize, her language having made strides from the last time they’d talked about where she’d come from. Somehow he hadn’t thought to keep asking her all this time, failing to realize that as she spent days in front of the TV that she’d start to pickup communication skills that could make all the difference to finding her home.

“He took me there but she was gone and he was angry. I didn’t want to leave and so I screamed until you came. He wanted to take me back through the trees to the place I live but I hated it there. I don’t want to go back,” she adds after a drawn out moment, her voice weak as she looks up at him through her lashes.

“You don’t have to go back, kid. Never.” She nods and runs a hand across the image, the Norman Rockwell painting having served as a fitting puzzle for them to work on as they continued this masquerade of family life. He tries not to see the humour in it, but a smile eventually finds its way to his lips and she grins back at him.

“What?” She asks as she slides the final piece into place, the scene of the dinner table so realistic that he has to shake his head.

“Nothing - just this puzzle is the same picture as what everyone thinks a good ‘ole American family should be and here we are...” He lets the sentence drift off, her eyebrow cocking.

“Are we - family?” It slips out of her and he has to pause, careful with his next words.

“I don’t know. You have a family out there and we’re going to find them. But in the meantime, I think we can call ourselves friends, at least.” She lets that sit in the air between them for a few minutes, teeth chewing on her lip until she gives a brief nod and gets up from her seat. “Hey - do you think you’d know the way back through the trees? To where you lived before?”

The question comes to him on a whim and it pulls him up straight, eyes locked on her as she wanders to the fridge and looks inside. "Maybe," echoes her reply, a glance behind her shot towards him.

"I'd like to try tomorrow, if you're up for it," he presses when she doesn't say anything further, getting up from his chair and leaning against the edge of the couch. She's stalling in the fridge, turned away from him as she shrugs and digs further into the back. It strikes him as odd as she does it, her usual open wonder nowhere to be found as the chance to trace her steps stands before them. "I won't make you go back, El. But if we're going to find your Mama, then I need more to go off of. I'm getting nowhere here and every day that passes..."

"Promise?" She interrupts as she turns towards him, face neutral.

"I promise you're not going back to where they hurt you." They stand staring at each other for a moment, eyes locked in some kind of stand-off. He doesn't give in, knowing that if he were to do that she would see it as a break of that promise.

"Okay." With her reply he lets out the breath he'd been holding, standing up and walking around the side of couch before settling into it and turning on the TV. She comes to join him, legs curled up under her as she flips through the channels without moving.

Later, as the night deepens and the news rolls on, El turns towards him. "Hopper?"

"Yeah kid?"

“What if Mama isn’t okay, when you find her?” Her voice falls to a low whisper as she says it, as though it pains her to even think it.

“You still won’t go back there,” he answers surely, twisting to look at her head on.

“But after. Where do I go?” Eyes wide and uncertain, she looks like she did the day she came out of the woods and it hurts to not know the answer, the hesitation building in him as he tries to think of options.

“I don’t know yet. But if you’ll trust me, I’ll make sure you’re taken care of, alright?” It’s the best he can do, hating to not be able to give her something more.

If anyone had asked him two months ago whether he’d be hiding a kid in the family cabin he would have thought they were crazy. The possibility of him even taking care of himself, let alone a little girl with powers he couldn’t explain, was preposterous. But here he was, a tiny makeshift family that had brought him back from the brink and given him something to work towards to ensure she was going to be okay in the end.

Still though. A part of him knew it wasn’t enough.

“They made me hurt people,” she whispers later, when he’s helping her settle under the covers.

“Hurt people?” He replies slowly, determined to not let her see it phase him. He’d suspected as much when she’d mentioned MKUltra before, but still the honesty of it rubbed him raw.

“Bad people.” Looking down at her hands, she picks at her fingers anxiously until he rests his hand across her knuckles, a steady rock in her internal storm.

“With your powers?” Hopper asks and exhales the breath he’d been holding.

“Yes. I didn’t want to - “

“I know, kid.”

“They forced me to find them and listen to them. And if they were really bad I had to hurt them. Papa said if I didn’t he would keep me in my room with the lights off. I hated that and he knew it. I didn’t want to hurt them. But...” She pauses and closes her eyes, expression tight. “I didn’t know. I didn’t know.”

“El,” He says and squeezes her hand, steady and measured. “You don’t need to explain it to me. I understand. You’re just a kid and what they’re doing... It’s war. You were drafted, just like I was. We didn’t want to do what we did but - “

“What’s ‘war?’” The question gives him pause and he closes his eyes, the memories there in the back of his mind like snapshots of misery.

“It’s when two groups of people fight over something rather than talk about it. Sometimes a lot of people get involved and many die fighting, even when they didn’t want to join. Does that make sense?” She frowns and nods, pondering his words, the conversation so distant from any nighttime story he’d ever told that it nearly gives him a laugh.

“You were in a war? Did you win?” The question causes a reactive sigh, his face tight as he shakes his head.

“Nobody really wins in a war. They all just end up broken. Now, that’s enough for tonight. Get some sleep - we’ll get an early start tomorrow, okay?” He stands up from where he’d been crouched next to the bed, his knees cracking as his body protested the movement.

Nowhere in the night’s plans had he thought that the conversation would end like this, an honest moment that both angered and saddened him. El didn’t deserve to have the past she had, one devoid of childhood and filled with the unthinkable. Whatever monster had done this to her deserved to be destroyed. She couldn’t go back there and if her sister was still alive, maybe they could find their way forward together.

Halfway out of the bedroom, Hopper turns as El mumbles something he can’t quite make out. “What’s that?”

“You’re not broken,” she repeats louder, watching him from around

the edges of the blanket. Her confidence soothes the anger in him and his shackles lower, shoulders relaxing as he looks back at her.

“Neither are you, kid.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I had a writing spurt and am happy to share this. I hope you enjoy it and thank you for leaving such lovely comments! <3

12. Chapter 12

They walk for almost an hour before they break through the trees, a large building standing tall before them. The sight instantly forces El back into the brush, her squeak of fear the only sound apart from the hum of the air intake system they were looking at.

“It’s okay,” Hopper whispers, turning on his heel and coming to kneel in front of her. His hands rest on her shoulders as she hyperventilates, her small frame buzzing and her eyes darting around them.

“I don’t - don’t make me go back, please, *please* ,” she repeats and tears fill her eyes, voice cracking on a held in sob.

“You aren’t - we aren’t here for that. I need you to calm down though. Can you do that for me? Can you follow my breaths? In... Out... In... Out,” he continues even as the familiarity and the pain tears through him. Sara had been like this that first day. *Sara* . “In... Out...”

Fighting to keep himself together, to keep El together, he rubs his hands from shoulder to elbow, repeating the movement with the breathing commands. Time creeps slowly by until finally they seem to be able to center themselves, her panic having subsided and the tears dry on her cheeks. His memories still burn but the distraction of being here, now, helps him and he’s able to take the map of the town from his bag and spread it out against the side of a tree.

“Hawkins National Laboratory?” He mumbles to himself, glancing over at the building that stands alone surrounded by trees. In all his

time spent looking for Larrabee he hadn't thought to look in his own backyard, the solitary land having been closed off to the public since he was a kid. Run by the Department of Energy, he'd figured it was just another place on the grid, one that supplied the electricity to the town and nothing more.

But El was certain this is where she'd come from and he knew better than to doubt her. Even if she'd been lying before, her reaction upon seeing the place where she'd been held captive was pure and instinctive - you couldn't force a kid into a panic attack. Not one like that.

"Do we have to stay?" El murmurs as he lowers the map, tucking it back in his bag and looking around them.

"No. We can head back to the truck now. I'll come back out later and see if I can poke around a bit more. How are you feeling?" It only strikes him as odd after the words are out of his mouth, his question similar to what he'd always asked Sara after one of her attacks. He had to stop relating the two - it did neither of them any good to get caught up in the past when there were things in the present that needed their focus.

"I just want to go back to the cabin." Nodding, he reaches out a hand to help her up off the ground and together they head back to the truck.

After El is safely deposited back home, Hopper heads into town to start fishing for information on the lab and the people who work there. He stops in first at the station, sidling up to Flo and trying to pry information from her. She pleads ignorance and goes on her lunch break, mumbling about his bizarre behaviour and how he

never used to care about anything in this town. He tries not to take it personally.

Instead he returns to the library, parking out front and staring at the doors and the ominous figure who stands beyond them. He really didn't want to spar again with a woman scorned - he didn't have time and the prospect of it frustrated him. Starting up the engine again he headed towards the main drag and started working his way through the shops that could potentially have dealings with the lab.

Radioshack was last on his list and he'd tried to put it off for as long as he could. He knew Bob was working - it'd come up in half the conversations he'd had already that day - and Hopper wasn't keen on conversing with the man whose girlfriend he almost kissed less than a week ago.

But that wasn't El's fault.

"Chief!" Bob greets with a wide smile, looking up from the tools and pieces of a small object scattered across his work station.

"Bob, I was hoping to catch you here." Hopper slides off his hat and looks around the store, checking for wayward customers before getting closer and leaning against the counter. "I wanted to ask a few questions that I'd prefer don't get out to the public. You know, police business and everything."

Bob shakes his head and holds up his hands, laughing lightly as he does it. "Okay - you got me. I did partake in a bit of fisticuffs when we were out for Karen's party, but I swear it was well deserved - "

Standing up straighter, Hopper furrows his brow and cocks his head to the side. "Fisticuffs? With who?" The idea of Bob throwing a punch was downright unbelievable - not just from the boy he knew from school but everything he knew about the man now. He was a marshmallow, harmless and sweet with no substance.

"Oh - so you didn't - no, okay," he laughs awkwardly as his cheeks flush, hands flustered in the air. "Lonnie came just after you left. Tried to get into it with Joyce. I guess I, uh, pushed him and he fell - but that's not really what you came here for, right?"

"Nope. But I do love a good Lonnie story," Hopper replies and shifts on his feet. He did love hearing about Joyce's shitbag ex-husband getting his due, but rarely got to revel in it as the Chief of Police.

"I hate the guy. After everything Joyce told me about him - ugh! At least if we move to Maine she won't ever have to deal with him again!"

It feels like a mirror is shattering within him as Hopper listens to Bob continue on about Joyce and their potential move. He tries not to show it on his face but he must fail because soon Bob is trying to roll his comments back and stuff the beast back in the box. Hopper tries too, to let the possibility settle in his stomach and reduce the choking feeling from his neck.

"Anyways, Chief, what can I help you with today? New radios for the station? Maybe a new TV for your place?" He offers with a customary tight laugh, the one Hopper remembers from high school.

“Um, I think I’m mostly just looking for information. Do you have any contacts with Hawkins National Laboratory? I figure since they’re run by the Department of Energy, maybe it’s connected with all of this technology stuff you work with. Maybe you have a contact there, or they have an account with this place?” Hopper resets his focus away from Joyce and back onto the lab, careful to word his questions without accusation or wayward suspicion.

“You mean that big place out on the edge of the town? I’ve never been inside, but a regular customer I have says he used to work there. He’s a weird guy though, doesn’t really like people that much. What do you need to know?” Bob finishes with a lilt of question in his voice.

“You gotta name for this customer? I’m doing some work on an old case, would be helpful to get the perspective of one of these guys who worked there,” Hopper says and stretches the truth, careful to leave just enough of it that it’s believable.

“Sure thing - he was in a few weeks ago. Guy by the name of Ray Carroll. Doesn’t live in town though, only comes back for meetings I guess. He’s got a real knack for batteries,” he adds and flips through a book he’s pulled from a drawer. His hand flies down page after page until he lands on something and shouts, “Ah-ha! Got it! Do you want me to write down his address for you Chief?”

“Yeah - great,” he mumbles as the man starts writing the information onto an old receipt. The bell over the door jingles as Bob hands Hopper the slip, the man’s face brightening as he looks around Hopper’s shoulder.

“Joyce! Lunch break already?” Hopper swallows back the lump in his throat before he turns around, preparing himself to face the woman who somehow has him tied up in knots. When he finally does see her, a cold part of him that he doesn’t quite understand, merely nods in her direction before slipping past her and out the door.

He’s half a block away before she catches up to him, her hand wrapping around his wrist and her small frame bursting in front of him. “You’re not even saying hello to me anymore?” She hisses, stopping his movement back towards his truck.

“I nodded!” He counters, stepping around her easily.

“Oh, come on! What changed? What is this Hop?” She riles, outpacing him until they’re both at the driver’s side of his truck, her hand slapping the door closed as he starts to pull it open.

Surprise riddles through him as she seethes, her jacket engulfing her but doing nothing to hide the way her chest rises and falls heavily with frustration. With anger. The recognition of it has him shaking his head, pulling the handle towards him slower.

“You want to talk about this now? Here? Or do you want to get in the truck where we can have a little semblance of privacy?” He asks lowly and waits until she sighs and rounds around to the passenger side. They both climb in and stew in the tense silence, their breathing audible in the enclosed space.

“What was that, the other night?” She starts, voice small and all bravado from before extinguished as she chews on her nails beside

him.

“What was what? Nothing happened, Joyce,” Hopper replies lamely and rubs his hands over the steering wheel to keep from reaching out to her.

“Nothing happened. Sure. Nothing happened,” she repeats and shakes her head, eyes averted out the passenger side window. He tries not to see the way her frown spreads or the way her shoulders slump, her posture growing smaller as the words escape her.

“I thought you’d prefer that what with the move and all,” he adds weakly, not wanting to press it further but having to get it out of him. He couldn’t stuff the feelings back inside, they were bubbling up and spilling out.

“What mo - oh... Oh that. Hopper, that’s not, I mean, we’d talked about it but Bob is just - “

“You don’t have to lie to me. We don’t owe each other anything.” It strikes like a blow and he knows just how to aim it so that she recoils and shifts, for a moment disappearing into herself.

“I thought maybe, after... “ She whispers, hesitant, before sitting up straight and pushing her shoulders back and her chin forward. “If there was ever a time for us, Hopper, tell me now.”

He stays silent even though he wants to shout to the ceiling, to pull

her against him and feel her skin on his. Instead he shifts in his seat until he's facing her, lips clamped shut but a hand sliding across the seat until it brushes her leg. "It can't be right now, but I don't want it to be never."

Like a fish out of water she flounders, mouth opening and closing before she slides her fingers between his. A tight squeeze and then she's gone, slipping from the passenger seat and back out onto the street.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm away for the next little bit, so hopefully this will tide you over. I'll try to keep writing while I'm gone, but don't be surprised if there's no updates :)

13. Chapter 13

It's less than a week after their conversation in his truck that Hopper sees Joyce with Sherry Lawson, a realtor that he'd bedded soon after moving back to Hawkins. The understanding stings and instead of acknowledging them, of walking over and saying hello as he would usually do, he ducks his head and takes his lunch to go without a word.

Hurt and misery flows in his veins for the rest of the day, his mood soured at the obvious rejection of what he'd thought had been an understood middle ground. The way she'd left had given him hope, had let him believe that maybe his feelings were returned, but seeing that she was going through with the move made him ache in a way he hadn't expected.

So he took his lunch and hid out in his office, calling Cindy at the library to request she start pulling records from the clippings about anything that had to do with Hawkins Lab or MKUltra. It's a shitty thing to do, to give her all that work, but he doesn't have it in him to go sit somewhere where Joyce or Bob or one of the kids could come in and make him have to face up to reality.

He picks up the printing on the way back home that night, bringing Cindy an apple as a peace offering and shrinking from her reach as she attempts to smack his shoulder. Promising not to do it again, he lets her kick him out and lock up the front doors without a goodbye, leaving him to carry the binders of photocopies back to his truck in two trips.

Back at the cabin, El recognizes something is wrong. She can sense it like a bad smell, brow furrowing and voice softening as she helps him

retrieve the last of the binders from the front seat. Neither of them talk much as they prepare dinner. Instead they focus on the ingredients, Hopper working from a memory of his mother's recipe as he guides El on preparing the perfect mac and cheese.

"Comfort food," he grumbles when she looks into the pot quizzically.

"What does that mean?" She questions, slipping back to the table and lifting the cover of one of the binders.

"It's food you make when you've had a bad day. When you want to feel better, I guess," he replies with a shrug of his shoulders, stirring as she starts paging through the sheets of paper.

"Why are you sad?" Looking towards her, he shakes his head and mumbles under his breath, her attention peaking at the dismissal. "We don't lie," she reminds him lightly, catching his eye with a gentle smile.

"Right. I just had a rough day is all. It's nothing for you to worry about though, I promise," he says as he tries to reassure her. He couldn't let this get in the way of finding her family - that was the priority and the rest was just inconvenient timing.

"Hopper."

"Seriously kid, it's just some personal issues. An old friend is - "

“No! Hopper - it’s... I think this is Mama?” She lifts the binder so that he can see the page, her face stark white as she watches him. Abandoning the stove, he quickly steps closer and grabs the binder from her to read through the article.

‘Local Woman Sues Department of Energy’ reads the headline, the story going into depth on the case of Terry Ives who believes her daughter was stolen by a man working at Hawkins Lab named Doctor Martin Brenner. The further the story gets, the more ridiculous the claim becomes until Hopper remembers just who El was and the abilities that she’d already shown him. It was no time to write off illogical facts as falsifications - even the most radical of stories should be given fair reasoning with the change in reality as he knew it.

“Are you sure this is her? Are you Jane Ives?” Hopper asks with wide eyes, the smell of the mac and cheese starting to burn distracting him from her shocked expression.

“I don’t know,” she states and pulls the binder out of his hands so he can take the pot off of the burner. Leaving it on the stove, he leans against the counter and rubs his face brusquely as he tries to get his bearings.

“What do you mean you don’t know? She’s your mother,” he mumbles from behind his hands, glancing at her with a pained expression.

“I don’t - I didn’t know her.” Surprise rises through him and when he looks at her - really looks this time - she’s staring at the picture and running her finger over the image with a gentleness beyond her

years. "I only saw her in the dark place. And she always disappeared. They hurt her. I saw that."

An unbearable anger threads into his mind then, the recognition that not only was she deprived of something so basic but that this search may end with no place for her to belong. The article was almost a decade old, if her mother was still alive there was no telling how she would receive El - *Jane* - after all this time.

The rest of the evening goes by in a blur, the meal not destroyed but certainly of little comfort to him or the kid as they eat it in silence. Afterwards Hopper focuses on the binders until the early hours of the morning, following the trail of Terry Ives and her quest for justice.

With minimal sleep and the unprocessed frustration from the day prior, he heads into work and snaps at his deputies enough that it causes Flo to send him home, "Your bad mood can't stay today, go sleep it off Chief," she chastises as she drops his keys on the desk, shaking her head and leaving without a goodbye.

It was just as well that he leave, his attention split between two things that wanted more than he could give. One part Joyce, one part El. Neither of the women who a year ago were more than just figments to him as he was floating and lost in his own deep abyss.

The same distraction that frazzled him at the station followed him to the gates of Hawkins National Laboratory, the security guard giving him a quick once over before turning him away at the entrance. Pissed off and unwilling to take anymore roadblocks, he parks his truck off the side of the highway and grabs his bolt cutters from behind the front seat. Hiking through the thinning brush takes time but he makes it to the fence eventually with a sheen of sweat on his

forehead. Clipping through the cheap fencing he squeezes past the hole and creeps his way up to the edge of the building as the sun starts to lower behind the treeline.

Somehow he makes it inside, ducking past the exterior guards and feeling like it's a cakewalk to make it through somewhere with the military presence of the base where he'd gone through basic. Instinct drives him through the hallways as he wanders around, grabbing a lab coat from an abandoned office and noting down mentally the twists and turns that take him to places of interest. With no direction or knowledge of where he's going, Hopper determines the best plan is to take the building floor by floor and soak up as much of the layout as he can.

He's travelled the floorplans of at least the third floor before a guard finally takes notice of him, calling for him to stop before he takes off at a jog towards the elevator. The doors close just before they can stop him and for a moment, huffing and puffing in the corner of the metal box, he thinks he might be able to get away. But then the doors open on the sixth floor and the waiting soldier takes one look at him and butts the handle of his rifle against his skull.

Hopper wakes up later that evening in his trailer, covered in sweat and floundering in his own filth. It takes him a minute to realize where he is, so accustomed now to waking up in the cabin with the smell of the fireplace to greet him that he can't place himself and it causes a panic to release into his veins.

Sitting up with a groan as his head spins, Hopper touches his fingers to his head and hisses at the sharp pain that spikes. "Motherfucking asshole," he growls, leaning forward to avoid the way his head spins. It's then he notices the pills and beer cans scattered across his table, their obvious presence looking staged. That part hadn't been him -

someone else had made it look like if he didn't wake up it was an overdose.

The realization forces him to his feet and makes the room swoop and unbalance. He takes it slower as he stumbles around the space and tries to find his keys and wallet. If nothing else he was late for dinner and the kid wouldn't appreciate that - not after all the progress they'd made in the last while. She couldn't find out he'd gone to the lab. There'd be too many questions and he wasn't prepared to answer them just yet. He had to go back and try again, if only to see if there were any other kids they had trapped behind those walls.

"Hopper!" The knock on the door is sharp, the voice accompanying it bringing a heavy dread into his gut. He couldn't deal with Joyce now. Not when his head hurt like he'd been hit by an axe and with his emotions still raw. He needed at least a week. A month. Forever, before he could have this conversation with her.

Doing the only thing he can think of, he drops to the floor defensively and hides behind the couch, out of sight from the windows that he knows she could reach from the porch. She shouts and knocks a few more times before swearing at him, telling him she knows he's home because his damn truck is in the driveway. "If you don't open this damn door Hop, I will make you rue the day!"

He stays put like the chicken he is, curling up and closing his eyes until the room stops spinning and the painful light eases from his vision. Eventually she leaves, her car starting up and peeling down his driveway at a quick pace that's audible with the way the gravel spits up behind her.

When he does finally get to the cabin El gives him the cold shoulder,

at least until she catches sight of the darkening bruise along his temple, the one just barely visible against his hairline. She stops tuning him out then and offers to take care of the dishes, giving him a wide berth until it's time for both of them to turn in for the night.

Notes for the Chapter:

Surprise! I had more time to work on this than I thought! Hopefully you are enjoying this ;)

14. Chapter 14

Ray Carroll is a hard man to track down. Every time Hopper drops by his place unannounced he's never there, the place empty and the lights shut off. He figures it must be his shifts that get in the way so when he switches them around, he half expects that he'll catch him home on the first try.

He doesn't.

He does catch sight though of a van full of hooligans, trolling the neighbourhood and watching the place with almost as much interest as him. It becomes so obvious one day that he decides not to come in his work truck, borrowing the keys off of Flo to use her wood-panelled station wagon to see if they'll make a move when the threat of police is no longer there.

What happens when he arrives that afternoon catches him by surprise - the hooligans out of their van and wandering through the bushes of the building and casing the joint. Hopper watches with interest as a dark-skinned girl looks through the windows, her mohawked friend picking up rocks and tossing them at the window until the light flickers on. There's no doubt in his mind that it's Ray who looks out the window, expression confused as the girl stares back at him.

But he never looks right at her. His gaze sweeps the yard, head leaning forward as though looking on the periphery of the yard and not seeing the people standing right in front of him. The exchange is bizarre and it forces him to sit up straight to watch as they creep towards the front door and start to pick the lock.

Once they're inside he climbs out of the vehicle and approaches the building slowly, careful to keep to the shadows as best he can. At least that's what he plans before he hears the shout of pain from inside, a man's voice crying out in surprise.

Through the front door and into the living room, he stumbles onto the scene of the van-dwellers circling the man as he cowers on the floor, the girl he'd seen earlier swinging around to look at him with wide eyes.

"Whatever you're doing, stop now. I'm Hawkins Chief of Police," he states evenly with his hands held before him, heart racing in his chest. A small part of him remembers what El had said, that her sister was already out in the world. Another girl with powers that made things seem unreal. Maybe this was her.

"You don't belong here, Policeman," the girl utters, confident and low. Hopper watches as she takes a breath, her body relaxing into the tension and her shoulders lowering from around her ears. It's subtle but the change in her is a marked difference and he doesn't let it slide.

"You don't want to do whatever you're planning on doing. Get out of here. Don't do this," he replies evenly and cocks his head towards the door. The mohawked man laughs, sharp and bitter, as he spins towards him and raises his gun.

"Old man, you better get lost or I swear I'll - "

"Axel, hush," the girl interrupts and pushes his hand away, the gun swerving to face the floor. "Policeman, this man owes me something he cannot repay. Leave now. There's nothing to see here -"

The words disappear just as fast as the people do, right before his eyes. One second they're standing before him and the next all he sees is thin air, a ragged couch, a laz-e-boy with a quilt over the back and an aged carpet with stains wearing out.

"What the fuck," he sputters and spins on his heel, eyes scanning the room for any trace of the group. Finding nothing, he steps to the door and looks outside, watching for any sign that they're making an escape. "How the hell - Jesus, the kid didn't tell me anything about this shit..." Grumbling, he comes back inside and stalks towards the side table where papers are strewn about.

Half distracted as he rifles through the crumpled envelopes, he almost misses the way the light on the side table wobbles. The room sways and vibrates, flickering before revealing the group inching towards the front door with the girl staring at him and blood dripping from her nose.

"I know your sister," he states as the shock has him freezing in place, eyes sinking to meet hers as she glares at him. When she doesn't move, he drops the mail and stands up straight. "The kid - she has 'Eleven' tattooed into her arm right here," he lifts his fingers to trace along his forearm, careful not to look threatening as the girl before him closes her eyes and shakes her head.

"Don't," she hisses, closing her fists.

"She got out. She said Papa was making her try to find you but you were already gone."

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“I’ll take you to her - “

“Kali, come on,” Axel calls from the doorway, glaring at the two of them. The girl - Kali - wipes at her nose and shakes her head, hair flopping from side to side.

“She wants to see you again,” Hopper adds as she starts to back away, twisting away from him.

“She hasn’t seen me in years. I escaped from there a long time ago Policeman, you’ve got your story wrong.” Kali turns away from him and runs a hand through her hair before spinning back to him with a hand outstretched. “That place took everything from me and now I’m taking it back. I’ll find her when the time is right - “

“She wants her mother - do you know where she is?” He presses, stepping towards her as she steps away.

“Eleven was there since birth. She has no mother.” It hurts to hear but he knows she’s being honest, her grasp of what had happened to them both far beyond what El can communicate.

“Come with me to her. Help me explain and keep her safe. I can help you - “

“None of us are safe until they’re all dead and that’s exactly what I’m planning to do.” Her voice sends a chill down his spine, the anger and threat obvious as she disappears through the door with Ray Carroll somewhere in tow.

As soon as they’re gone, Hopper breathes a sigh of relief. His body groans with the weight of her departure, hand coming up to rub his beard and press into his eyes. He’d come here to question Carroll and find answers but the man had been swept out from under him as he was confused and stunned into inaction.

The city detective in him wanted to go after them, bring Carroll to proper justice, but the small town cop who just wanted this girl to have a home decided it was better to leave it be for today. He couldn’t get caught up in that too, he didn’t have enough brain space left to deal with it tonight. Later. Another time. Tomorrow. Never.

The drive back to Hawkins gives him time to turn over what he’ll say to El, certain that he’ll need to explain what he’s witnessed but keenly aware that the rejection of Kali leaving without her - leaving while knowing she was alone - would be a hard pill to swallow. Especially for the kid who already knew she had no place in the world.

After a quick exchange of vehicles with Flo, Hopper heads into town to run errands, careful when he passes by Melvald’s to glance inside and see if the coast is clear. When he doesn’t see Joyce behind the counter he says a small note of thanks to the powers that be and parks his car down the road. He thought for sure she would be working today - he’d started to memorize her schedule over the last few years - but she was nowhere to be seen as he steps through the

door.

Beelining his way to the children's section, he picks up a stuffed animal from the shelf and tucks it under his arm before making his way back to the checkout. Paying the girl quickly, he departs from the shop and holds tight to the animal as Joyce walks briskly towards him.

For a moment he debates disappearing without a word, noticing that her head was down and there was still a possibility of escape. But it passes and soon she's looking up and catching his eye, her own eyes red and bloodshot.

"Joyce?" He questions, mouth dry. She tries to force a smile to her lips but it falters, tears welling up instead as her face crumbles. He instinctively takes a step towards her and lets his hand brush against her elbow before stepping forward and pulling her against his chest.

Despite the misery he'd been suffering, despite the way he'd behaved when she'd come by the trailer, he was still brought to his knees by his friend crying. It'd been like this since they were kids, throughout high school too, and he knew there was no reason it would stop now.

Except, of course, if it was stopped on her side.

"Hop," she croaks, pushing gently on his chest until he's standing at arm's length from her. Having felt the loss of her in the distance - physically and emotionally - Hopper swallows thickly and tries to keep his mouth shut. "I don't - we can't do this here," she finishes and chooses then to wrap her arms around herself.

“Okay - yeah. My truck is just up the street?” They walk towards the vehicle with a tense silence surrounding them, a couple feet between them until they climb in their respective doors and Hopper tries to hide the stuffed animal behind his seat, thankful she hadn’t noticed. It’s another beat of time before he turns on the truck, the engine turning over loudly as he steers away from the curb.

They drive and drive and drive until the the sun lowers to the tree line, both so deeply occupied with their thoughts that they barely notice the turns or the way the road expands out in front of them. Occasionally, Joyce hiccups on a quiet sob, her tears still fresh and her body still closed off from him until he reaches out and grabs a hand out of her lap to weave his fingers with hers.

It seems to do the trick, pulling her back from the edge of her misery and calming her the way his arms hadn’t earlier. “I ended it with Bob,” she whispers so lowly he almost doesn’t hear it over the engine. It clinks through him like a rock in a tin can, reverberating and settling with a hum in his chest. “I didn’t do it for you, so don’t get all weird on me, okay?”

“Joyce - “

“No, please don’t say anything right now. I need you to understand because I heard when you said it couldn’t be right now and I listened but I just - I knew then that I had to end it with him. I couldn’t wait for you and still be with him. That wasn’t fair to him. But it still really fucking hurts. I - Bob is a nice guy. I like him, I do, but... I don’t know,” she tapers off and sighs, sniffing and squeezing his hand reassuringly.

“You’re waiting for me?” He mumbles pathetically, heart in his throat. She snorts and rubs the bridge of her nose.

“God, I guess so? I don’t know. It just - it felt wrong. I haven’t stopped thinking about it since... Well, since forever,” she pauses and leans forward, twisting to face him awkwardly.

“But what about Sherry Lawson? Weren’t you meeting with her to sell you place? I saw you two the other day and - “ She groans and lifts her hands into the air, frustration visible in her posture.

“Is that what you’re hung up on? We were having lunch. Bob had set it up - I didn’t realize until I got there. I never wanted to move in the first place, I just sort of, went along with it. Wait, is that why you’ve been avoiding me?”

He shrugs his shoulders and looks out the window, mumbling quietly, “I thought you decided to leave and didn’t want to tell me...”

“That’s not - Hopper, come on!” She sniffs and smiles widely, tear-stained cheeks reddening as her hair is pure chaos around her face. “I’m not moving and if I was, I’d want you to help me make the decision. That’s what I realized.”

He lets the weight of what she’s said settle as he turns down another dirt road and drifts the truck to a stop on the side of the road, eyes glancing her way until at last he catches her eye and he gives a small smile. “Come ‘ere,” he requests and lifts his arm so that she can slide across the seat and rest against him, her head on his shoulder.

It feels like it did in high school, only that time it wasn't a rough breakup and a heartfelt exchange that caused her tears but a little slip of paper with his number on it. One thing hadn't changed though, even after everything, and that was the way her heartbeat still vibrated through her chest and into his, reminding them that they were alive despite what the world threw at them. He squeezes her closer, his cheek resting against the crown of her head as he let's the nostalgia muddle his memories until they don't hurt quite as much.

Notes for the Chapter:

Happy Canada Day! I'm heading out to melt, hopefully you enjoy this!

15. Chapter 15

The reprieve from what he'd witnessed at Ray Carroll's place is short-lived as Hopper drops Joyce back at her vehicle a short time later. He radios home to El and let's her know he'll be home late - again - and makes a point to pick-up pizza on his way.

When he gets there he's surprised to find her already finished her meal, her discarded plate on the table and the TV blaring in front of the empty couch. She's not in front of it like she usually is, instead he finds her door closed tight and an old record playing in her room, one that he'd shown her a few weeks ago to lift her mood after a rough night.

"El," Hopper calls, stepping to her door and knocking lightly. She turns the handle and let's the door fall open, her face neutral from her perch on her bed as he steps in the room. "I brought pizza," he offers, holding out the box towards her. She scowls and looks down at the picture book they'd been reading the last few nights, dismissive and cold. "Come on kid, I'm trying to offer a compromise here."

"Compromise?" She asks without looking up.

"Yeah, c-o-m-promise - it's something that's kind of in between, like halfway happy. I know a pizza isn't much but I also got you this." Pulling the stuffed animal from behind his back he steps into the room, a tentative smile on his lips.

Looking up from the book she watches as he brings the item closer, her brow furrowed until he drops it into her hands. "Is this - for me?" She questions, hands gentle as they hold the soft edges.

“Yeah - I figured you could use some company for when I’m not around. It’s not much, but it’s something. I know it kinda sucks being cooped up here and I’m working on it,” he pauses and glances down at the bed, waiting for permission to sit down. Shifting her legs, she glances up at him and he catches sight of the smile that peaks at the corners of her mouth. “I uh, met your sister today.”

El’s head snaps up at that, hands closing around the stuffed animal until her knuckles whiten. “Eight?”

“Is that her number? She was going by Kali,” he says and stops, unsure of how to proceed. He’s never had to be that person - the one who talked to a kid about the shitty parts of life. There’d always been a parent or a social worker or some other poor soul who had to break the news to them. Except with Sara. He’d had to be the bad guy there and it’d nearly destroyed him.

“Is she - where was she?”

“At a bad man’s home. He used to work at the lab and - “

“Did he have her? Is she okay?” El bursts from her blankets, eyes wide as she scrambles off the bed in her anxiousness to save her sister. His heart breaks as tears well in her eyes, the concern for this girl so unreturned that it physically hurt.

“She was okay - he didn’t have her. She actually, uh, had him. I couldn’t stop her before she left, is what I wanted to tell you.”

“Oh. Does she know I escaped? Is she coming back for me?” The question was one he had hoped he could avoid but knew it would be near impossible. The kid was too smart for that.

“Um. Not right now. She - “

“When is she coming? Tomorrow?” Her eyes brighten and he hates this part, hates snuffing out her hope with the miserable reality.

“She didn’t say. I’m sorry kid,” he mumbles as her face falls and she climbs back onto the bed, pulling the stuffed animal to her chest. The sight of it reminds him that at least he did that right, a small token to ease the shit that kept coming at her. He’d never more desperately hoped for something to go her way, even just something small.

“S’okay,” she mumbles after a moment, blinking the tears from her eyes and reaching for the pizza box on the bed. Hopper stops her hand for a second, resting his gently over hers until she looks up and meets his gaze.

“It’s not okay and you’re allowed to feel sad about it, you hear me?” He offers, waiting until she nods slightly, a small shrug of her shoulders signals her acceptance of what will be for now. “And hey - even if it takes her a long while, you’ve still got a place here. Even when we find your Mama, okay?” The last part spills out of him before he can close his mouth, his throat dry with the recognition that he’d just made a promise he didn’t know if he could live up to.

“Promise?” It teeters on the edge between them, hesitant and flimsy, before he squeezes her hand and nods.

“Promise.”

With the deal struck between them it feels like a weight has been lifted, the heaviness he'd been holding up for both El and Joyce these last days seemingly resolving itself through tough conversations. He takes it as a sign, though he's careful not to let the feeling convince him that the black hole he's just crawled out of won't be back to get him.

But that's for another day. Tonight he lifts the pizza box from the bed, gets to his feet and nods his head towards the front room. “Wanna put on a movie and eat this?”

“A western?” She sits up and grins at him, beating him through the door to jump on the couch.

Together they demolish half of the pizza before the movie is out, their bellies full as he finally tucks her in and retreats to his cot. Restless, he turns on the thin mattress and reviews the day in his mind.

He'd made progress but had still come up short, more information from Carroll and Kali now out of his grasp. He didn't know how to track them now, not when her powers were seemingly so developed that she could literally disappear in front of him. But Hopper couldn't decide whether that was who he should be tracking or if he was losing sight of finding the kid's mom. Or, he thought, he could be

falling too far down the rabbit hole and missing the bigger picture altogether. What about the other kids that the lab had? The Ones and Twos who he hadn't seen when he was there. Were they still there?

The thought pained him. If there were other kids, didn't they need to be saved too? Resolving to finally ask El tomorrow if she knew about any of the others, he turns his thoughts instead to Kali and Carroll. The girl had left with the threat that she would kill the man and he was pretty sure that wasn't a bluff. He knew he should have done something. Should have. But didn't want to. Carroll didn't deserve saving.

Spinning round and round in his head, he takes in a deep breath and holds it until it bursts out of him in a whoosh. The repetition of it helps and soon he's relaxing into his pillow, a calmer plan starting to form in his mind.

Tomorrow he'd go back to Carroll's apartment and look for anything he could use to get ahead. Then he'd circle back to the lab and see if he could get back inside after the day staff had left for the day.

It wasn't much of a plan, but it was something.

Notes for the Chapter:

I wrote this partially in Rome, so forgive the delay!

16. Chapter 16

Breakfast had been relatively quiet after Hopper told El that he would be working late. He figured that was a white lie - he could very well be working late any other day - and so she didn't need to worry about where he was actually going. Especially after his line of questioning about other kids in the lab had gone so poorly - awkward pauses, distant expressions and no real confirmations coming from her in either direction.

He left her with basic instructions on dinner and took off in his truck back into town. At Melvald's he ducked through the door and removed his hat to see Joyce behind the till, a ghost of a smile on her lips as she catches his eye. Glancing around for customers he finds none and comes to join her, leaning casually against the till with his hat in his hands.

"I need your help," he starts, careful to keep his expression neutral as he puts his plan into motion. He'd turned it over in his head for hours the night before, ironing out the holes and trying to risk-proof it as best he could.

Standing nearly toe to toe with him, Joyce looks up from her nails with a curious look on her face. "What do you need?" She asks with a rasp in her voice. He clears his throat at the feeling that bursts in his chest, swallowing the desire to reach out and pull her to him.

"I just - I've got to do a thing tonight and I need someone to check on the cabin in the morning. I'd do it myself but I might be gone and not able to get there. Do you think you could stop in, if I don't give you a call by midnight?"

“What? Hopper, what do you have going on?” The curious look falters and concern floods in, her body instinctively stepping back so that the closeness of her loses its grip on him.

“It’s just a thing. I promise - it’s nothing to worry about. I just need someone to go out there tomorrow morning to meet a repair guy if I’m not back in time. You think you could do that for me? Please?” He tries not to look desperate, tries to look earnest and like everything was normal, but he knew he wasn’t pulling it off. Something in his voice was giving it away and her worry bloomed until her hand was lifting to his cheek and her thumb was sliding through his beard.

“Is this why it’s not now?” She whispers, knowing eyes locked on his. The intensity of her gaze and the feel of her skin on his has him closing his eyes and his head pressing into her hand, like a dog desperate for human contact.

Behind them the bell over the door rings, signaling another shopper and Joyce jolts away taking with her the comfort and steadiness that her touch had given him. He steels himself for the moment he steps away, a brief ghost of sadness crossing his expression. Joyce catches it and nods to the back of the store where he can go wait until the customer checks out.

It’s only a couple minutes but he makes the most of it, grabbing up a loose envelope and a spare piece of paper and jotting out everything he could about the situation - just in case. Sealing it closed, he watches as the woman pays and disappears without much fanfare before heading back to the cash. Joyce’s false smile falls as she looks at the letter and dollar bill in his hand.

“Hopper, you’re starting to make me worry,” she half-jokes, half-admits.

Shrugging, he hands her the paper and looks down at her with as much confidence as he can muster. “It’ll be okay. I’ll call you tonight when I get home and then you can throw this out. If I don’t call you, please go read this and go to the cabin. It’ll explain everything. Okay?”

She nods and glances towards the door, quickly stuffing the dollar in the till and the envelope in her purse. He takes it as acceptance and starts to leave, certain that if he stayed much longer he’d blurt out the whole story and then fail to follow through on his plan. He’s half out the door when she catches up to him with a hand wrapping around his wrist, pulling him back into the building before reaching her other hand up to the collar of his shirt. He doesn’t fight when she pulls him down towards her, their lips meeting in a kiss that fogs his mind.

The shock of it has them both pulling back almost instantly, though they don’t step away like they had before. Instead he inches closer, hands coming to her hips and his hat falling to the floor as she presses against his abdomen so that she can reach her arms around his neck. They deepen the kiss as though they were drowning, pulling away when they run out of oxygen and even then only far enough that his cheek rests against her forehead, her hands curled up in his shirt.

“If you don’t come back, I’m going to be so angry with you James Hopper,” she sighs after a moment, her hand sliding through his beard and into the hair at his temple. Her lips come up to press once

more against his before she sinks down to pick up his hat and place it on his head. When she looks at him then her eyes glisten, a high colour in her cheeks.

“I’ll call you. I promise.” He runs his hand down her arm and then disappears from the store, heart in his throat as he heads back to his truck.

Ray Carroll’s place is still desolate when Hopper returns, jimmying open the lock and starting first with the desk and all its loose papers. He’s moved onto the kitchen when the first bits start to click into place, a work schedule here, a procurement document there.

It takes a few hours but soon he’s learned that Carroll was an orderly at Hawkins Lab, a position that was terminated a few years before El escaped. Since then he’s been living on his earnings and piecemeal jobs that pay the bills and not much more, an almost satisfactory change of success in Hopper’s opinion.

The one thing he doesn’t find in all his searching is what Carroll witnessed while he worked there - he knew it was a long shot when he started searching but still he had hoped that maybe something would have the answers for him since he couldn’t ask the man himself.

Leaving Carroll’s place, Hopper heads back to his trailer to start prepping for the next stage of his plan. He collects his gun, changes into comfortable clothes and brings a few supplies that would get him past the fence once dark had set in. Arriving to the west side of the land, Hopper parks his car down an old logging road and heads by foot towards the fence line.

“Alright, let’s do this,” he grumbles as he once more cuts through the metal and climbs through the hole. Avoiding all hints at life, he picks the lock on the emergency door and scrambles into the building before anyone else can notice him slinking around outside.

As soon as he’s in he notices something is wrong – very wrong – compared to the last time he was here. All around him are signs of chaos and panic, staff bolting in every which way with no mind paid to him as he stands at the end of the hall.

Somewhere beyond him there’s a screech and a howl, a bloodied man stumbling out of a set of doors and gasping up at him. “She’s back!” He groans before fading into unconsciousness, his eyes rolling back in his head.

Hopper reads the situation and ducks back out the door of the building, his breaths coming fast and steady as he tries to remember his training from the war. When shit hit the fan he had known what to do then... Now he wasn’t too sure. If there were still kids in there, would the girl save them? Or would she abandon them like she had El?

“Goddammit,” he sighs and re-enters the building with a determined stride. If he was going to do this, he was going to get it done fast and get out of here before the group could find him.

Starting where he’d left off before, Hopper makes his way methodically through the space and tries his best to avoid the guards, even if they were preoccupied with running through the building and shouting into their communications devices. Nobody even bothers to

shoot him a worried look as he pokes through all the doors, the experience baffling and raising his anxiety with every passing moment.

It takes nearly an hour, the last thirty minutes with added stress as the alarms start to ring out overhead. With his stomach in his throat, Hopper finds himself in the lobby of the building as shouts and screams echo through the hallways. Turning on his heel, he looks out the front doors and finds one of the group members from Ray's apartment standing guard. The girl slowly turns to face him, her expression moving from confusion to anger in a second.

"Kali!" The girl screeches into her walkie-talkie, eyes wide as she looks up at him through the glass.

"Shit!" Hopper hisses and takes off down the hallway he'd just come from, desperate to find a way out that wasn't blocked by the hostile punks that Kali had somehow convinced to help overthrow this place.

Halfway back to the door he'd come through, Hopper pulls up short as Kali turns a corner up ahead. The girl frowns, looking him over and crossing her arms over her chest. "So we meet again, Policeman," she greets, though her face is nowhere near welcoming.

"Look – I just came to see if there were more kids. I don't want any trouble," he responds and tries to look unthreatening. He'd fight if he had to but there was no telling what he was actually up against.

"You aren't here to meet with the bad men? Really?" She laughs and shakes her head, her expression vicious when she looks back up at

him as he shakes his head. “I find that hard to believe. Men like you stick together when they’re threatened. Why should I take your word for it?”

“Because I have Eleven and I’m keeping her safe, unlike you. The girl just wants to find her mother. So just let me leave and – “

“Her mother is two hours away living with her sister, confined to a rocking chair. She remembers nothing. They’ve turned her brain to mush and destroyed her, just like they destroyed her daughter. There’s no bringing her mother back – I already tried and nothing works. She’s gone to us. The best the kid can hope for is freedom and if she’s trapped with you she’ll never have it. If I see you again,” Kali interrupts his pleading, uncrossing her arms and curling her fists closed. “I will kill you – like I’ve killed them. This is your last chance, Policeman.”

Nodding, Hopper seizes Kali’s words and heads toward the emergency door he’d come through leaving the mess of noise and chaos behind. He tries to focus on getting past the fence, through the trees to his vehicle while remembering everything that she’d told him. It hadn’t been much but her information had been valuable. Valuable and concerning.

Was the kid’s mother really another victim of the Lab? A part of him knew she had to be - parents don’t up and just disappear after fighting so hard to find their kids – and it pained him to think about it. If there was no Mama, El had no one. She was alone and abandoned, the other kids from the Lab either disappeared or causing havoc. He couldn’t just close the door and walk away now – he owed it to her to keep her safe and let her live a normal life.

Swearing under his breath, covered in sweat from his frantic searching, Hopper climbs back into his truck and slams his hands against the steering wheel until the frustration releases just a little bit. The immediate future was clear – go back to the cabin, stand down Joyce, expand the search to towns two hours away, confirm the worst case scenario. The further out stuff was what worried him.

Could he keep this kid safe? Could he care for her? Didn't he already?

Notes for the Chapter:

Live from monsoon season headquarters, this next chapter!

17. Chapter 17

“So you’re back now?” Joyce asks quietly into the phone, her voice hushed as Hopper strains to hear her.

“Yeah – it sorted itself out so I’m all good, you can throw the envelope out.” Twisting the cord in his hand he looks over to where El is sitting on the couch, her knees pulled into her chest a way that made him pause.

“Good – I’m glad. Are you ready to tell me what it is or do I – shit, Hop, I’m sorry but I’ve got to go!” Joyce exclaims, her voice rising as she bids him goodbye. In the foreground he can hear her muffled words to her boys, her hand over the receiver.

“Okay – I’ll find you tom– “ He starts but is cut off by the dial tone, the abrupt ending of their conversation causing him to frown. That would be his excuse for tracking her down tomorrow, he figured, and hung up the handset. “Okay kid – what’s on tonight?”

El turns towards him and shrugs, hands clinging together around her legs. “I can’t tell – the TV is all fuzzy.”

“Probably a storm coming in. How about we play a round of Scrabble before turning in?”

She tucks her head into her knees and sighs, glancing up at him. “No thank you.” Her mumbled words send a chill down his spine, the possibility of his two girls both pulling away triggering a familiar twinge in his chest. He’d been here before. He couldn’t do it again.

“You sure kid? I’ll even let you win,” he jokes and comes to sit beside her, his hand resting a few inches from her foot.

“I’m sure. I think I just want to go to bed.” He watches as she says it, watches the shadow pass over her face as she closes her eyes. There’s something not right in the way she clutches her hands together but he can’t put his finger on what it is.

“Okay – that’s okay. Want me to tuck you in or anything?” He offers

in hopes that she'll tell him what's bothering her. She doesn't, instead choosing to simply shake her head and crawl off the sofa before heading into her room.

An hour passes as he lamely tries to make the TV work, the reception fluctuating in and out and the picture rarely staying for more than a minute. Eventually he tires of the struggle and changes into his night clothes, stokes the fire and then crawls between his sheets to finally rest after the bizarre day he'd just lived through.

Parts of it had been good. Not finding more kids in the lab. Getting out alive. That kiss. But other parts of it had rattled him and he was finding it hard to shake. Kali was a lost kid, there was no arguing that, but he couldn't help but wonder if El would turn out the same. He hoped she wouldn't – he didn't think he could handle her if she turned vengeful, her powers were too strong. Not to mention he felt something for her and it curdled his stomach to think that eventually she would go off on her own without him and he'd be all alone again.

That thought made him turn over fitfully, the blankets pulled up around his ears as he huffed into his pillow. Since when did he start hating being alone?

Forever. It's always been that way. He was desperate to have his family, any family, to keep him sane and back from the edge. The ache had never gone away, just softened since El came into his life and now with Joyce coming around, with her waiting for him, it seemed too good to be true.

So he didn't let the thoughts linger, sucking in a breath and focusing on trying to sleep until his eyes shut and his breathing slowed.

Sometime later with the fire low and the chill rising in the cabin, Hopper wakes with a start to a lightning flash that cracks through the window.

"Papa," El whispers above the roar of thunder, cringing into the corner of the couch as the roof rattles in the wind. The storm had rolled in without him realizing it, rousing the kid from her bed and bringing her to where she felt safe. Soon after he woke the power flickers and all that remains is the light from the low gas lamps, the

two of them cornered by memories that come raging back with the storm overhead.

“What’s that?” Hopper asks, sitting up and turning to look at her. He was exhausted, his body ready to sleep but his mind buzzing with Sara and the way she’d always used to curl up next to him on the couch when thunder rolled. The scene unfurling that night as the lightning flashed was too similar, the pain too heavy to escape, as El wrapped the blanket tighter to her chin.

“Papa. He’s coming,” she adds with wide eyes, watching him for any reaction.

“He isn’t coming, kid. It’s just a storm. It happens. It’ll be over soon and then you can go back to bed,” Hopper replies and stands up to pace, desperate to put some distance between them to save himself from the misery that was starting to close in and make him wish for oblivion.

“He is - “ she starts and squeaks as the cabin shakes around them.

“Why don’t we get you back in bed and I’ll read you something? I know I’ve got some books we haven’t read yet around here,” he mumbles, hoping to distract her from her fears. He turns to the table and shoves it aside, lifting up the floorboard hatch that opens to the storage area. Inside he pulls out Sara’s box, digging through the remnants of his daughter to find the copy of *Anne of Green Gables* he knew was in there.

The pain lashes through him as his hands sweep over the hardcover, memories of reading the story to his girl in the hospital churning his gut and making his throat tighten. When he looks up again, El is staring at him over the back of the couch with a furrowed brow.

“Come on,” Hopper croaks and motions to her bedroom, waiting for her to climb slowly off the couch and back into her bed. She’s curled tightly once more when he opens to the first page, reading the words even as lightning strikes and makes the window glow behind him.

They make it through the first two chapters before El finally slips back to sleep, the storm outside starting to settle and her mind easing

with the tale of Anne and the Cutherbert's. By the end of it, Hopper's pain is almost manageable, the familiarity close enough to bridge his hurt and give him back the happiness he'd felt reading to his daughter those years ago.

Soothed by the novel and the pattern of the rain on the tin roof, he heads back to the cot in the corner of the living area and crawls under the blankets to rest his head.

When morning comes it's not because El is already up and poking through the cupboards like she usually does, it's because the sun is shining through the open door at just the right angle to blind him.

He sits up slowly as the realization dawns on him, the door swinging in the wind causing his stomach to drop. Why was the door open?

"El?" He calls out, getting to his feet and looking around the cabin for signs of the kid. His gaze lands upon muddy footprints trailing from the door to the bedroom, the sight piquing his anxiety until a sweat breaks out along his brow. Bursting through the door to the bedroom, he finds the bed empty, blankets missing and feathers strewn about the place.

The next hour passes slowly, like moving through molasses as he scours the trees around the cabin, calling out for her and trampling through the brush. The voice inside his head growls and tells him it's his fault, that he hadn't protected her like he should have, that the black hole that surrounded him had closed in on her too. It's a vicious voice that holds a knife to his throat, his chest aching with the lack of oxygen.

With panic lacing through his blood, Hopper heads back to the cabin to grab his uniform kit and a radio. Time starts to slip between his fingers as he stumbles through the station, desperate and grasping at straws, unsure whether to call in backup or keep this hidden much longer. It's only when he finds an old Post-It with a note from Flo that he realizes what he has to do.

18. Chapter 18

His truck breaks the speed limit as he heads across town, adrenaline pumping in an unfamiliar way after years under the influence. When he eventually makes it to his destination he can barely put the truck in park before he's knocking on the door and curling his hat in his hands.

"Speak of the goddamn devil," Joyce hisses, opening the door and stepping onto the porch to join him, her expression furious as she looks up at him. "Have I got a bone to pick with you!"

Taken aback, he stumbles backwards as she crowds into him, nerves popping at her spitfire spirit. "Joyce - I don't - "

"You damn well should know what this is about! I just kicked Lonnie out of this house *again* and he told me that he hasn't come by here since he left town over a year ago. You lied to me, James Hopper," she seethes and pokes her finger into his chest. "Do you know what a fool I looked like? Telling him the Chief of Police told him to keep his distance and he had the gall to come to *my house* like he owned the place!"

"He was here? Did he hurt - "

"Don't act all concerned now, like it would make a difference! He already thinks I'm crazy so this was just the cherry on top of a shit cake!"

"I'm sorry but that's why - "

"No, you don't get to come over here and lie some more to me. I didn't give you any hassle when you were drowning your sorrows these last few years. I didn't even raise a fuss when you showed up at work and left me with a mysterious letter that I couldn't even - " He holds up his hand to cut her off, his expression tight.

"I need your help," he says lowly, conscious of the way the sound travels from the porch into the living room of her house. Squinting at him, she twists away with a scoff and throws her hands into the air.

“Sure you do, Hop, sure.” Reaching for her arm, he grabs at her before she breaks free and turns back on him. “I’m not playing anymore games with you. You told me it was Lonnie breaking in - who was it actually?”

“That’s what I need your help with. It was a kid - she’s missing and -

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Hopper, what did you take? Are you high on something?” She asks and steps closer, her hands lifting to tilt his face down towards her for inspection. The anger that had filled her features moments ago fades as she looks up into his eyes, frustration and confusion replacing it. Pushing her hands away he shakes his head and stands up straight.

“I’m fine. But the kid isn’t - she went missing after the storm last night and I can’t find her,” he pleads, hoping she’ll come around and help him. He was wasting time – he needed to find El.

“Why don’t you call Powell? Or Callahan? If it’s a missing kid, surely this is something you handle as part of you know, your job?” She volleys back, suspicion creeping into her features as she steps back and crosses her arms over her chest.

“I can’t involve them because this kid is different. Joyce, when I found her at your place... She threw a chair at me. But she never touched it. She did it with her mind. I’ve never seen anything like it. I couldn’t tell the guys, they’d want to turn her in and that’s another part of it. It all started with a domestic... This guy she was with - I just, I can’t explain it. He did tests on her - “

“You sound like a crazy person,” she mumbles as his train of thought wavers its way through the mess of information that he’s collected. It was too much to load into one conversation, that he knew, but he had to tell her the important bits so that she would understand. So that maybe she would help him.

“I know. I know I do. But she needs help. If this guy has her, I don’t know what they’ll do to her. We were trying to find her mother... That’s what I was doing at the library that day. I know you don’t owe me anything but you told me a while ago that you were here if I

needed you and I need you now to help me find her. She needs our help.” Hopper finishes, shoulders near his ears as she stares up at him.

“So it was a kid who broke my dishes and destroyed my kitchen? Not Lonnie?” Joyce asks tentatively, slowly turning the idea over in her head.

“Yes. With her mind.”

“Leave that part out of it because it’s not a fucking selling feature, Hop. You said she went missing? Last night?” Joyce uncrosses her arms and chews her thumb, eyes closed as she considers it.

“She was afraid the man who had her before was coming to get her,” Hopper groans and rubs his hands over his face dejectedly. “I don’t know where she is – I don’t – “ His voice cracks and he closes his eyes tightly to keep the tears at bay. The worry strikes against his grief and slides over him, heavy and thick like a tar.

“Hopper... Oh James – stop, shh, hey, take a breath.” Joyce’s hard exterior caves and she runs her hands over his shoulders until his breathing settles back to normal.

“I’m sorry – she’s just – she’s been living with me at the cabin and we’ve, well, bonded or something. I’m worried they have her again and they’re going to make her disappear. It’s my fucking black hole all over again.”

“It isn’t – no. This isn’t because of you, don’t think like that,” she soothes, her hand coming up to brush along his jaw. He presses into it, needy for her touch and salvation. “What do you need from me? How can I help?”

Closing his eyes, he turns the question over in his mind. He hadn’t really thought this far – the chaos of his panic had clouded his brain and apart from finding help he didn’t know what else to do. Where would they take her? What were they doing with her? Did they even have her or did she leave?

None of the possibilities comforted him.

"I'm trying to figure that out," he starts, looking down at her and raising his hand to her shoulder. "Maybe... Maybe we can re-trace her steps. Can you come with me?"

Her hand slides over his and she squeezes, nodding. "Let me tell the boys I'm going out and get a jacket. Wait here," she adds and slips back into the house. Hopper twists in the wind as he waits, stepping down off the porch and putting his hat back on his head. Looking out at the trees around the small property, he forces a breath to fill his lungs, huffing out of him in a gust that rises like steam.

When had it gotten so cold, he wondered, scuffing his boot against the solid ground. He hoped El was warm. Hoped she wasn't in just her pajamas, lost amongst the trees. The mental image of it made shivers run down his spine and a furrow form at his brow. She needed to be okay. He needed to find her.

"Alright – you ready?" Joyce interrupts his silence and rests a hand on his back, a steady comfort forming from her touch. Pulling himself together, he looks down at Joyce and reaches a hand out for hers, squeezing it tightly before linking his fingers with hers.

"God no – but let's go."

Notes for the Chapter:

A couple more chapters to go! Sorry the updates have been so infrequent - I've been in and out of the country over the last few months and it's hard to write when jetlagged!

19. Chapter 19

The first place they head is to the house where he'd found her, small and huddled in a bathtub as a storm raged overhead. He notices now the way roof bows and collapses, the building falling in on itself after having lasted through the storm.

"What is this place?" Joyce asks from beside him, leaning forward with her hands on the dash.

"This is where we first got called to, Callahan and I. Someone overheard screaming and called us here for a domestic but when we got here it was strange, it was just the kid and this guy. They both ran off after the storm died down and it wasn't until a few days later when I found El at your place. I figured we'd start here, check it off the list?" He offers before sliding the truck into park.

"The kid's name is Elle? Or is that – "

"They've branded her with the number 'Eleven' on her wrist, so we've been calling her 'El' for short. We found an article though – we think her name is Jane but we can't find her mother." Beside him he can feel Joyce's eyes on him, burning with more questions and a careful understanding not to pry. Not yet.

The door to the house is broken and when Hopper steps inside he's not surprised to find it in worse shape than he'd last seen it. Leaves are strewn across the floor and water drips through the collapsed roof, puddling in a low lying corner. Below their feet the floor warps and bends, straining under their weight.

"We shouldn't stay here long – it feels like the floor is going to give out under me," he sighs and steps gingerly forward, careful to test the floor before putting his full weight on it.

"Let me go in – I'm lighter than you," Joyce offers and steps past him, not waiting for his permission. She moves lightly across the entrance and through the living space, careful to step over the broken bones of the house before heading down the hallway towards the bathroom. "It's disgusting back here. Why would anyone bring a child here?"

She shouts from out of sight, his heart in his throat.

Hopper sighs and presses his fingers into his brow. "Because they're monsters," is all he can manage in reply.

"Yeah – I'd say. There's no one back here though, unless you count – fuck!" She screams as the house shudders and a crack echoes out from where he can't see.

"Joyce?" He shouts, disregarding the risks and stumbling his way into the hallway. He finds her near the floor, hair in her face and her leg trapped between the floorboards. Where once Callahan had stood with a mattress alongside him, Hopper dropped down to his knees to grab at Joyce's shoulders and bring her back upright. "Jesus – fuck, are you okay?" His hands bruised her skin and panic arced and soared across his features. He hadn't brought her here to lose her too. He couldn't lose her. He couldn't.

"Hop – stop, you're hurting – " The words burn him and he jolts backwards, collapsing onto his backside and swearing repeatedly.

"I'm sorry – God, I'm so sorry," he utters as the adrenaline and fear begin to overwhelm him. He realizes his grip too late and ricochets off of the ground before storming away, all the while apologizing to the air and the gods and anything that would listen.

"James – please, take a breath and – "

"Stop telling me to breathe!" He roars in return, his hands flying into the air as he spins around to face her. The site of her still trapped in the floor, rumpled and taken aback, causes him to freeze in his spot.

"You know it helps, remember? You taught me that," she states carefully, gaze searching his.

An aching memory from too long ago comes whipping back, Joyce beneath him and hyperventilating, her half-naked form grappling at everything to try to escape from his embrace. He remembers thinking that he'd done something wrong, that maybe she'd regretted what they'd just done. He remembers the way when he tried to pull away it only made her cries louder, her nails clawing into his shoulders as

she begged him not to go.

“Breathe Joy, just breathe,” he’d instructed, trapping her to his chest and placing his hand over her heart. *“Follow my breaths – 1 Mississippi, 2 Mississippi.”*

“Come back to me, James,” Joyce whispers from her place on the floor. His eyes flicker back up to hers, the memory dissipating like a thick fog as he comes back around. “I’m okay – I’m not going anywhere. Especially if you don’t help me get my leg unstuck from this damn floorboard.”

Her snort of laughter brings him back from the abyss and he smiles weakly, trudging across the floor to kneel before her once more. “I’m sorry – “

“Stop apologizing, just help me get out of here,” she laughs, reaching her arms up to wrap around his neck.

He bends forward to examine the wood, checking to make sure she’ll be able to be pulled free without any further injuries. When he looks up again, she’s watching him intently, her gaze soft and sad. “I’m going to stand up, just keep your arms around me, okay?” He instructs quietly before sliding his hands around her hips. Her quick nod gives him permission to lurch upward, his grunt of exertion mingling with her gasp of pain. He doesn’t stop until she’s clear of the building, his arms holding her tightly as they stumble onto the grass outside.

“Ow,” she groans as he lay her down, her hand coming to absently rub along her knee.

“Is it broken? Are you okay?” His hands fret over her, barely touching but checking everything until she grabs them both and holds tight.

“I’m okay – just a bit bruised,” she replies. Her hand once more comes to his cheek, gentling him as he forces his breaths to return to normal.

“I’m sorry I made you go in there,” he admonishes himself, turning

away from her abruptly and getting to his feet. Now that he knows that she's alright, there's a pull at him to keep going. To find El.

"You didn't make me do anything I didn't jump head first into. Are you ready to move on?" Her voice wobbles and when he looks down he sees the rejection cross her features, his unintended withdrawal causing her to recoil. For a moment he lets it settle around them, uncomfortable and sour, until he snaps out of it and reaches down for her.

"Thank you – for going in there. I'm sorry you got hurt," he adds as he drags her to her feet, locking his arms around her and holding her head to his chest. She feels the change in his emotions like whiplash, realizing that though he was clean and sober, his past still haunted him like a shadow.

"I didn't – but thank you for helping me get out. Come on, take me to the next place," she pulls back and looks up at him, her hand locking with his and dragging them to the truck.

They leave the abandoned house behind them in the dust, pulling back onto the highway and heading towards the only other place he thinks they could be. He'd hoped he wouldn't have to bring Joyce to the lab but he knew better – it was the one place he knew they would have to go.

Driving up to the gate, Hopper's hope falters as he enters through the security check point without any interference. There's not a single guard on hand to stop them – the place like a ghost town as they drive up to the front door. He stops when he gets to the glass entrance, climbing out of the truck and looking up at the looming building and its ominous form.

"What is this place?" Joyce asks from beside him, her hand lifted to block the sun from her eyes.

"Hawkins National Laboratory. This is where they've held her all these years. It was ransacked yesterday by an old patient like El." Joyce snaps her gaze up to him, wide eyed and frowning.

"Is this where you were going? Is that why you came to the store

yesterday and gave me that scare?” He nods and looks away, nervous under her stare. “They - the people here... They hurt kids?”

“Yeah. My research mentioned the MKUltra project but I don’t know for sure. The kids have these, abilities, I guess. But they’re still kids.” He spares a glance down towards her and finds anger in her expression, anger and a mix of sadness.

“How do we search this place?” She asks and lifts her chin determinedly, gearing herself up for battle.

“Well, when I was searching the place, the last place I ended up getting to was a security room with cameras. We could try to get there, see if anything is going on and get a perspective on the whole complex,” he offers and steps forward, unclipping his gun and bringing the handle down violently on the glass.

When it doesn’t shatter like he expects, he orders Joyce back to the truck and growls when she doesn’t comply. “If you’re going to stand here, so am I,” she grumbles and steps behind him, her forehead resting on his spine as he pulls the gun up to shoulder level.

It takes three shots before the glass finally gives and shatters, sprinkling everywhere and creating a hazardous path into the building. “I guess they’ll know we’re here,” he mutters as he holsters his gun, leading the way through the lobby and towards the staircase he remembers.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry sorry sorry sorry this took so long!

20. Chapter 20

The first body they come across is bloodied but still intact, slumped against the wall outside of the staircase. Joyce screams at the sight and it makes Hopper spin on his heel, his hand clapping over her mouth instinctively like he would have back in the jungles of 'Nam.

"He's already gone," he whispers and slowly lowers his palm, gently sliding it across her jaw. Joyce nods and closes her eyes, holding her breath until she lets it out on a shaky exhale. "Ready to keep moving?"

"Yes," is all she manages as he turns to head forward, her hands gripping his shirt tails as she closes her eyes and follows blindly.

They make it to the surveillance room without encountering another soul, Hoppers foot providing them access to a space glowing with lit televisions. Scanning through the footage one screen at a time, they come up empty except for more dead bodies and more exhausted signs of chaos.

"They have to be here," Hopper hisses, searching the footage for other proof of life, for anything that will tell him what to do next.

"There are so many dead – what happened here?" Joyce mumbles, pain and fear colouring her words.

"Another kid got revenge," he replies, lifting his shoulders as he continues through the cabinets. Maybe it was his time in the war or all the suffering he'd seen in his job. Maybe it was the desperation to find El or his conscious agreeing with Kali in the end. Regardless of what it was, he didn't spare a care for any of the fallen men that helped maintain this living hell for El and the other children. They weren't the victims here.

"Hop – are you sure about this girl? This El? How do you – "

"I would bet my life on her," he interjects and turns to face Joyce, composure solid as he looks down at her. She searches his gaze and looks once more at the TVs, shaking her head.

"I don't think she's here. I'm sorry." She reaches for him, wrapping her hand around his and leading him back through the door and down the stairs. He's at a loss for words as they go, mind filling with every terrible thought that it can conjure.

He thought that they would find her. Hadn't even spared a care for the fact that maybe she was already gone because the possibility was too terrible, too destructive for him to manage. But as Joyce led him back to the truck every idea rushed in and held court in the forefront of his mind, haunting and cajoling him until he couldn't handle it anymore and he lashed out at the cracked glass with a closed fist.

Instantly the pain of it brought him back around, the yelp rippling out of him and echoing off the walls. Joyce falters, jerking back at the impact and chasing after him as he stumbles away, his knuckles bloodied and bruised.

"What were you thinking? Dammit Hopper!" She scolds, pulling his hand closer so that she can inspect it. "You – you... I just!" She laments, throwing a hand up in the air and grumbling under her breath. If this was any other moment, if this was anyone else, she'd eviscerate them for being so stupid. But it was Hopper, her old friend who took licks from both their fathers, who lost his daughter and his wife and had fought his way back from misery to find solace in a kid with weird abilities. She couldn't blame him for lashing out when it seemed like his world was falling apart again.

He lets her bandage him up in the truck before she drives them back to his trailer. She's half up the drive before he mumbles something under his breath, her mind placing the words as a cold shudder runs down her spine. "We live at the cabin," he'd said, reminding her of the fragility of the situation. Not even bothering to confirm, she put the truck into reverse and changed course to head towards the cabin she'd lived in when her parents hadn't wanted her back.

"Do you bring all lost souls here?" Joyce asks as they pull onto the old gravel road, the truck bumping along the worn potholes.

"No, only the ones who need saving," he replies quietly and glances over at her from where his head leans dejectedly against the window.

Inside the cabin Joyce is surprised at the homely atmosphere that Hopper has built, this whole other side of him having been hidden from her all these years. She helps him settle at the table where a puzzle is half-completed as she busies herself with finding the first aid kit and grabbing two beers from the fridge.

Sitting next to him, Joyce pulls his hand towards her and she gets to work, checking and cleaning the wounds until his hand is ready to be wrapped in sterile gauze. She half expects him to drink both of the cans but is surprised when he makes no move to open them, his head hanging and his shoulders slumped as he breathes through the discomfort.

“All done,” she whispers after a while, scooting her chair closer and resting her head on his shoulder. She wishes he would snap out of it, that he would come back around and come up with another idea, but he doesn’t. After a while he simply gets up from his chair and heads to the bedroom, rejoining the living room with a stuffed animal in his grasp. Joyce remembers the animal from the stock boxes in her store and a pang of sadness tightens her chest.

Making his way to the couch, Hopper settles in the corner and looks up at Joyce, broken and miserable. She sits down slowly next to him, her arms wrapping around as much of him as she can manage without being uncomfortable. For a moment she wishes she was bigger, that she could envelope him the way he used to do for her, but it passes as she realizes that all he needs is contact before he crumbles.

When the morning comes it’s cold and forsaken, the fire having never been lit and the blanket and body heat doing little to keep them warm. Joyce is the first to move, lifting her head from his chest and shivering.

“I should call my boys,” she whispers as his gaze meet hers, the look in his eyes so clearly filled with loss that she has to look away to keep from crying.

“I should – I don’t know. You should go home,” he replies and lets his fingers tangle in her hair. She shakes her head and leans in for a chaste kiss, slowly pulling back and looking down at him.

“We haven’t finished looking yet,” she counters, not waiting for a cue before climbing off of him and heading towards the phone. Jonathan takes the story in stride, a curious hint to his voice as Joyce tries to explain.

“All I can think of is to find her mother,” Hopper says when she hangs up, his hands twisting around the stuffed animal. Joyce looks over from next to the phone and chews on her thumb anxiously. “If they’re not taking her back to the lab, maybe there is another place that her mother remembers.”

“You said you haven’t found her yet,” she responds weakly, nervous to extinguish any of his hope.

“I haven’t. But Kali - the other girl - said something the other day. That she’s living with her sister. Maybe I’ve been looking for the wrong name all this time,” he adds and shrugs, looking up at her for any sign of confirmation. She twists her hands together and nods slowly, eventually meeting his eyes.

“Should we try the station first?”

Two hours later and they’re on the road, Hopper’s anxiety almost palpable as he speeds down the highway. Joyce is perched beside him, the binder of clippings he’d had from the library opened in her lap as she catches up to what he already knows.

“What is your plan when we get there?” Joyce asks as Hopper turns down the hidden Larrabee road. They’d found it. Finally.

“I want to drive past, see if there’s - shit!” He slams the breaks on the truck and swings an arm out to stop Joyce from flying into the dash, the movement causing her to grunt and yelp.

“Hop!” She squeaks, gasping for air as she looks between the man at her side and the black vans tucked into the trees up ahead. “What are they - what is - “

“I think they’re here,” he whispers and puts the truck into reverse, swinging the tail end into a driveway before turning around and heading in the opposite direction. He drives for a mile or two before pulling onto an old dirt road and hiding the truck up among the trees. “I’m going to go on foot. If I’m not back in an hour I want you to head back to town and call Flo, she’ll know what to do.”

“That’s not fucking happening, Hop. I’m coming with you,” Joyce hisses as she closes the binder and looks around them quickly. Hopper shakes his head and frowns, watching her hands reach for the door handle and smacking them away.

“I can’t have you in harms way - you’re safe here. I need you to stay here - “

“You let me wander through that graveyard of a lab and *now* you’re worried about me? That’s ridiculous! You need my help. We’re not going to argue about this anymore,” she shouts and opens the door to jump down from the seat and look up at him angrily.

Hopper groans and rubs his face, getting out of the truck and coming around to the passenger side as Joyce closes the door. His hand settles on the handle and he opens it, tilting his head to signal for her to get back inside. "You're not -"

"I am!"

"I can't lose you too!" He counters with a shout, the birds lifting from the trees around them as Joyce steels her expression. She watches as his face shutters and pinches, his brow furrowing as he stands up to full height.

"You won't lose me and you won't lose this kid, Hopper. We're going to go there and get her back. You hear me?" She says lowly, stepping toe to toe with him and reaching up a hand to his chin. He closes his eyes and envelopes her hand in both of his, dropping it between them as he exhales shakily.

"If things go south, you come back here and get home, alright? Don't worry about me," he instructs, gaze searching. Her nod makes him swear under his breath, his heart in his throat as they turn towards the treeline and set off towards 515 Larrabee Road.